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Weird Tales

MARCH

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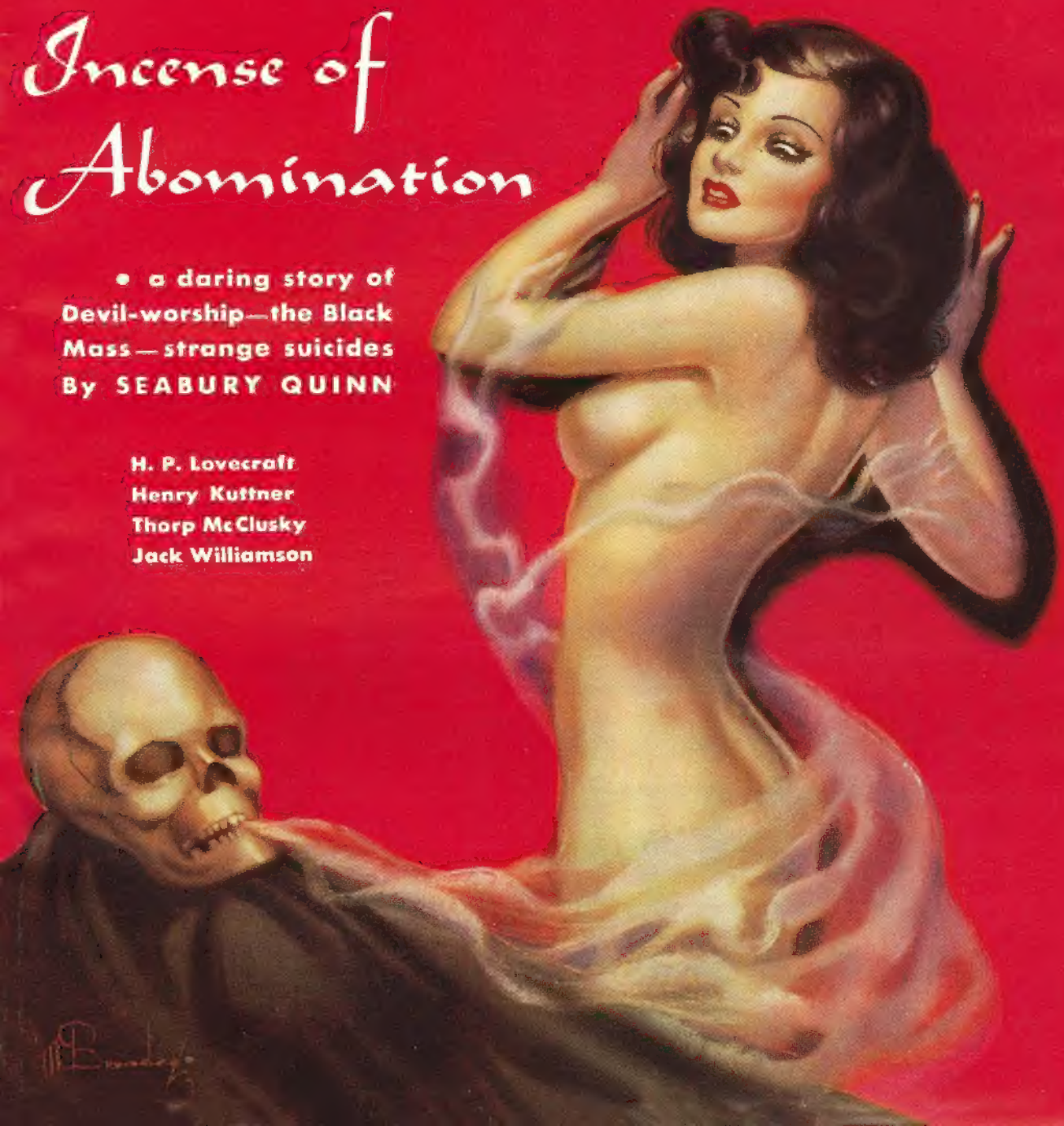
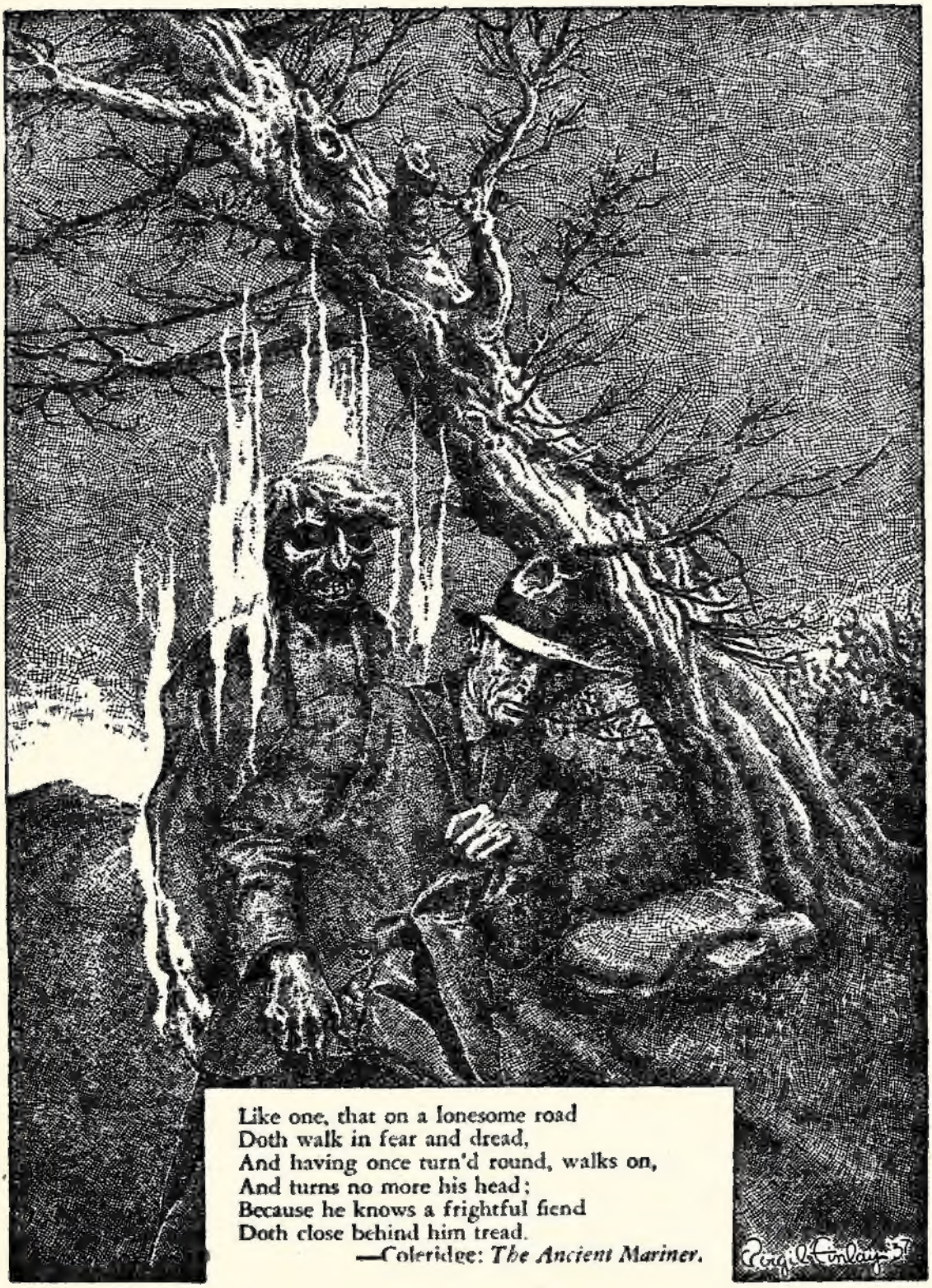
Incense of Abomination

• a daring story of Devil-worship—the Black Mass—strange suicides
By SEABURY QUINN

H. P. Lovecraft
Henry Kuttner
Thorp McClusky
Jack Williamson





Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turn'd round, walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.
—Coleridge: *The Ancient Mariner.*

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Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"She cannot quit the earth, but must wander among the scenes of her misspent life."

Incense of Abomination

By SEABURY QUINN

A daring story of Devil-worship, the Black Mass, strange suicides, and the salvation of one who had sinned greatly, yet was truly repentant—a tale of Jules de Grandin

". . . incense is an abomination unto me."
—*Isaiah*, I, 13.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT COSTELLO looked fixedly at the quarter-inch of ash on his cigar, as though he sought solution of his problem in its fire-cored grayness. " 'Tis th' damndest mixed-up mess I've iver happened up against," he told us solemnly. "Here's this Eldridge felly, young an' rich an' idle, wid niver a care ter 'is name, savin' maybe, how he'd spend th' next month's income, then zowie! he ups an' hangs hisself. We finds him swingin'

from th' doorpost of his bedroom wid his bathrobe girdle knotted around 'is neck an' about a mile o' tongue sthickin' out. Suicide? Sure, an' what else could it be wid a felly found sthrung up in a tight-locked flat like that?

"Then, widin a week there comes a call fer us to take it on th' lam up to th' house where Stanley Trivers lived. There he is, a-layin' on his bathroom floor wid a cut across 'is throat that ye could put yer foot into, a'most. In his pajammies he is, an' th' blood's run down an' spoilt 'em good an' proper. Suicide again? Well, maybe so an' maybe no, fer in all me time I've niver seen a suicidal cut across a felly's throat that was as deep where it wound up as where it stharted. They mostly gits remorse afore th' cut is ended, as ye know, an' th' pressure on th' knife gits less an' less; so th' cut's a whole lot shallower at th' end than 'twas at th' beginnin'. However, th' coroner says it's suicide, so suicide it is, as far as we're concerned. Anyhow, gintlemen, in both these cases th' dead men wuz locked in their houses, from th' inside, as wus plain by th' keys still bein' in th' locks.

"Now comes th' third one. 'Tis this Donald Atkins felly, over to th' Kensington Apartments. Sthretched on th' floor he is, wid a hole bored in 'is forehead an' th' blood a-runnin' over everything. He's on 'is back wid a pearl-stocked pistol in 'is hand. Suicide again, says Schultz, me partner, an' I'm not th' one ter say as how it ain't, all signs pointin' as they do, still ——" He paused and puffed at his cigar till its gray tip glowed with sullen rose.

Jules de Grandin tweaked a needle-sharp mustache tip. "Tell me, my sergeant," he commanded, "what is it you have withheld? Somewhere in the history of these cases is a factor you have not revealed, some denominator common to them all which makes your police instinct doubt your senses' -vidence——"

"How'd ye guess it, sor?" the big Irishman looked at him admiringly. "Ye've put yer finger right upon it, but——" He stifled an embarrassed cough, then, turning slightly red: " 'Tis th' perfume, sor, as makes me wonder."

"Perfume?" the little Frenchman echoed. "What in Satan's foul name——"

"Well, sor, I ain't one o' them as sees a woman's skirts a-hidin' back of ivery crime, though you an' I both knows there's mighty few crimes committed that ain't concerned wid cash or women, savin' when they're done fer both. But these here cases have me worried. None o' these men wuz married, an', so far as I've found out, none o' them wuz kapin' steady company, yet—git this, sor; 'tis small, but maybe it's important—there wuz a smell o' perfume hangin' round each one of 'em, an' 'twas th' same in ivery case. No sooner had I got a look at this pore Eldridge felly hangin' like a joint o' beef from his own doorpost than me nose begins a-twitchin'. 'Wuz he a pansy, maybe?' I wonders when I smelt it first, for 'twas no shavin' lotion or toilet water, but a woman's heavy scent, strong an' swate an'—what's it that th' ads all say? — distinctive. Yis, sor, that's th' word fer it, distinctive. Not like anything I've smelt before, but kind o' like a mixin' up o' this here ether that they use ter put a man ter slape before they takes 'is leg off, an' kind o' like th' incense they use in church, an' maybe there wuz sumpin mixed wid it that wasn't perfume afther all, sumpin that smelt rank an' sickly-like, th' kind o' smell ye smell when they takes a floater from th' bay, sor.

"Well, I looks around ter see where it's a-comin' from, an' it's strongest in th' bedroom; but divil a sign o' any woman bein' there I find, 'ceptin' fer th' smell o' perfume.

"So when we runs in on th' Trivers suicide, an' I smells th' same perfume

again, I say that this is sumpin more than mere coincidence, but th' same thing happens there. Th' smell is strongest in th' bedroom, but there ain't any sign that he'd had company th' night before; so just ter make sure I takes th' casin's off th' pillows an' has th' boys at th' crime lab'ratory look at 'em. Divil a trace o' rouge or powder do they find.

"Both these other fellies kilt theirselves at night or early in th' mornin', so, o' course, their beds wuz all unmade, but when we hustle over ter th' Kensington Apartments ter see about this Misther Atkins, 'tis just past three o'clock. Th' doctor says that he's been dead a hour or more; yet when I goes into his bedroom th' covers is pushed down, like he's been slapin' there an' got up in a hurry, an' th' perfume's strong enough ter knock ye down, a'most. Th' boys at th' crime lab say there's not a trace o' powder on th' linen, an' by th' time I gits th' pillows to 'em th' perfume's faded out."

He looked at us with vaguely troubled eyes and ran his hand across his mouth. " 'Tis meself that's goin' nuts about these suicides a-comin' one on top th' other, an' this perfume bobbin' up in every case!" he finished.

De Grandin pursed his lips. "You would know this so strange scent if you encountered it again?"

"Faith, sor, I'd know it in me slape!"

"And you have never met with it before?"

"Indade an' I had not, nayther before nor since, savin' in th' imayjate prisence o' them three dead corpses."

"One regrets it is so evanescent. Perhaps if I could smell it I might be able to identify it. I recall when I was serving with *le sûreté* we came upon a band of scoundrels making use of a strange Indian drug called by the Hindoos *chhota maut,* or little death. It was a subtle powder which made those inhaling it go mad, or fall into a coma simulating death if they inspired enough. Those naughty fellows mixed the drug with incense which they caused to be burned in their victims' rooms. Some went mad and some appeared to die. One of those who went insane committed suicide——"

"Howly Mither, an' ye think we may be up against a gang like that, sor?"

"One cannot say, *mon vieux*. Had I a chance to sniff this scent, perhaps I could have told you. Its odor is not one that is soon forgotten. As it is"—he raised his shoulders in a shrug—"what can one do?"

"Will ye be afther holdin' yerself in readiness ter come a-runnin' if they's another o' these suicides, sor?" the big detective asked as he rose to say good-night. "I'd take it kindly if ye would."

"You may count on me, my friend. *À bientôt,"* the little Frenchman answered with a smile.

THE storm had blown itself out earlier in the evening, but the streets were still bright with the filmy remnant of the sleety rain and the moon was awash in a breaking surf of wind-clouds. It was longer by the north road, but with the pavements slick as burnished glass I preferred to take no chances and had throttled down my engine almost to a walking pace as we climbed the gradient leading to North Bridge. De Grandin sank his chin into the fur of his upturned coat collar and nodded sleepily. The party at the Merrivales had been not at all amusing, and we were due at City Hospital at seven in the morning. *"Ah, bah,"* he murmured drowsily, "we were a pair of fools, my friend; we forgot a thing of great importance when we left the house tonight."

"U'm?" I grunted. "What?"

"To stay there," he returned. "Had we but the sense *le bon Dieu* gives an un-

fledged gosling, we should have—*sapristi!* Stop him, he is intent on self-destruction!"

At his shouted warning I looked toward the footwalk and descried a figure in a heavy ulster climbing up the guard rail. Shooting on my power, I jerked the car ahead, then cut the clutch and jammed the brakes down hard, swinging us against the curb abreast of the intending suicide. I kicked the door aside and raced around the engine-hood, but de Grandin disdained such delays and vaulted overside, half leaping, half sliding on the slippery pavement and cannoning full-tilt against the man who sought to climb the breast-high railing. *"Parbleu,* you shall not!" he exclaimed as he grasped the other's legs with outflung arms. "It is wet down there, *Monsieur,* and most abominably cold. Wait for summer if you care to practise diving!"

The man kicked viciously, but the little Frenchman hung on doggedly, and as the other loosed his hold upon the rail they both came crashing to the pavement where they rolled and thrashed like fighting dogs.

I hovered near the mêlée, intent on giving such assistance as I could, but my help was not required; for as I reached to snatch the stranger's collar, de Grandin gave a quick twist, arched his body upon neck and heels and with a blow as rapid as a striking snake's chopped his adversary on the Adam's apple with his stiffened hand. The result was instantaneous. The larger man collapsed as if he had been shot, and my little friend slipped out from underneath him, teeth flashing in an impish grin, small blue eyes agleam. "A knowledge of jiu-jutsu comes in handy now and then," he panted as he rearranged his clothing. "For a moment I had fears that he would take me with him to a watery bed."

"Well, what shall we do with him?" I asked. "He's out completely, and we can't afford to leave him here. He'll surely try to kill himself again if——"

"Parbleu! Attendez, s'il vous plait!" he interrupted. *"Le parfum*—do you smell him?" He paused with back-thrown head, narrow nostrils quivering as he sniffed the moist, cold air.

There was no doubt of it. Faint and growing quickly fainter, but plainly noticeable, the aura of a scent hung in the atmosphere. It was an odd aroma, not wholly pleasant, yet distinctly fascinating, seeming to combine the heavy sweetness of patchouli with the bitterness of frankincense and the penetrating qualities of musk and civet; yet underlying it there was a faint and slightly sickening odor of corruption.

"Why, I never smelled——" I began, but de Grandin waved aside my observation.

"Nor I," he nodded shortly, "but unless I am at fault this is the perfume which the good Costello told us of. Cannot you see, my friend? We have here our laboratory specimen, an uncompleted suicide with the redolence of this mysterious scent upon it. Help me lift him in the car, *mon vieux;* we have things to say to this one. We shall ask him, by example, why it was——"

"Suppose that he won't talk?" I broke in.

"Ha, you suppose that! If your supposition proves correct and he is of the obstinacy, you shall see a beautiful example of the third degree. You shall see me turn him inside out as if he were a lady's glove. I shall creep into his mind, me. I shall—*mordieu,* before the night is done I damn think I shall have at least a partial answer to the good Costello's puzzle! Come, let us be of haste; *en avant!*"

DESPITE his height the salvaged man did not weigh much, and we had no trouble getting him inside the car. In

fifteen minutes we were home, just as our rescued human flotsam showed signs of returning consciousness.

"Be careful," warned de Grandin as he helped the passenger alight. "If you behave we shall treat you with the kindness, but if you try the monkey's tricks I have in readiness a second portion of the dish I served you on the *Pont du Nord.*

"Here," he added as we led our captive to the study, "this is the medicine for those who feel at odds with life." He poured a gill of Scots into a tumbler and poised the siphon over it. "Will you have soda with your whisky," he inquired, "or do you like it unpolluted?"

"Soda, please," the other answered sulkily, drained his glass in two huge gulps and held it out again.

"Eh bien," the Frenchman chuckled, "your troubles have not dulled your appetite, it seems. Drink, my friend, drink all you wish, for the evening is still young and we have many things to talk of, thou and I."

The visitor eyed him sullenly as he took a sip from his fresh glass. "I suppose you think you've done your Boy Scout's good deed for today?" he muttered.

"Mais oui, mais certainement," the Frenchman nodded vigorously. "We have saved you from irreparable wrong, my friend. *Le bon Dieu* did not put us here to——"

"That's comic!" the other burst out with a cackling laugh. "*'Le bon Dieu'*—much use *He* has for me!"

De Grandin lowered his arching brows a little; the effect was a deceptively mild, thoughtful frown. "So-o," he murmured, "that is the way of it? You feel that you have been cast off, that——"

"Why not? Didn't we—I—cast Him out? didn't I deny Him, take service with His enemies, mock at Him——"

"Be not deceived, my friend"—the double lines between the Frenchman's narrow brows was etched a little deeper as he answered in an even voice—"God is not mocked. It is easier to spit against the hurricane than jeer at Him. Besides, He is most merciful, He is compassionate, and His patience transcends understanding. Wicked we may be, but if we offer true repentance——"

"Even if you've committed the unpardonable sin?"

"Tiens, this *péché irrémissible* of which the theologians prate so learnedly, yet which none of them defines? You had a mother, one assumes; you may have sinned against her grievously, disappointed her high hopes in you, shown ingratitude as black as Satan's shadow, abused her trust or even done her bodily hurt. Yet if you went to her sincerely penitent and told her you were sorry, that you truly loved her and would sin no more, *parbleu,* she would forgive, you know it! Will the Heavenly Father be less merciful than earthly parents? Very well, then. Who can say that he has sinned past reconciliation?"

"I can; I did—we all did! We cast God out and embraced Satan——" Something that was lurking horror seemed to take form in his eyes, giving them a stony, glazed appearance. It was as if a filmy curtain were drawn down across them, hiding everything within, mirroring only a swift-mounting terror.

"Ah?" de Grandin murmured thoughtfully. "Now we begin to make the progress." Abruptly he demanded:

"You knew Messieurs Eldridge, Trivers and Atkins?" He flung the words more like a challenging accusation than a query.

"Yes!"

"And they, too, thought they had sinned past redemption; they saw in suicide the last hope of escape; they were concerned with you in this iniquity?"

"They were, but no interfering busybody stopped them. Let me out of here, I'm going to——"

"Monsieur," de Grandin did not raise his voice, but the look he bent upon the other was as hard and merciless as though it were a leveled bayonet, "you are going to remain right here and tell us how it came about. You will tell of this transgression which has caused three deaths already and almost caused a fourth. Do not fear to speak, my friend. We are physicians, and your confidence will be respected. On the other hand, if you persist in silence we shall surely place you in restraint. You would like to be lodged in a madhouse, have your every action watched, be strapped in a straitjacket if you attempted self-destruction, *hein?"* Slowly spoken, his words had the impact of a bodily assault, and the other reeled as from a beating.

"Not that!" he gasped. "O God, anything but that! I'll tell you everything if you will promise——"

"You have our word, *Monsieur;* say on."

THE visitor drew his chair up closer to the fire, as if a sudden cold had chilled his marrow. He was some forty years of age, slim and quite attractive, immaculately dressed, well groomed. His eyes were brown, deep-set and drawn, as if unutterably weary, with little pouches under them. His shoulders sagged as if the weight they bore was too much for them. His hair was almost wholly gray. "Beaten" was the only adjective to modify him.

"I think perhaps you knew my parents, Doctor Trowbridge," he began. "My father was James Balderson."

I nodded. Jim Balderson had been a senior when I entered college, and his escapades were bywords on the campus. Nothing but the tolerance which stamps a rich youth's viciousness as merely indication of high spirits had kept him from dismissal since his freshman year, and faculty and townsfolk sighed with relief when he took his sheepskin and departed simultaneously. The Balderson and Aldridge fortunes were combined when he married Bronson Aldridge's sole heir and daughter, and though he settled down in the walnut-paneled office of the Farmers Loan & Trust Company, his sons had carried on his youthful zest for getting into trouble. Drunken driving, divorce cases, scandals which involved both criminal and civil courts, were their daily fare. Two of them had died by violence, one in a motor smash-up, one when an outraged husband showed better marksmanship than self-restraint. One had died of poison liquor in the Prohibition era. We had just saved the sole survivor from attempted suicide. "Yes, I knew your father," I responded.

"Do you remember Horton Hall?" he asked.

I bent my brows a moment. "Wasn't that the school down by the Shrewsbury where they had a scandal?—something about the headmaster committing suicide, or——"

"You're right. That's it. I was in the last class there. So were Eldridge, Trivers and Atkins.

"I was finishing my junior year when the war broke out in 'seventeen. Dad got bulletproof commissions for the older boys, but wouldn't hear of my enlisting in the Navy. 'You've a job to do right there at Horton,' he told me. 'Get your certificate; then we'll see about your joining up.' So back I went to finish out my senior year. Dad didn't know what he was doing to me. Things might have turned out differently if I'd gone in the service.

"Everyone who could was getting in the Army or the Navy. We'd lost most

of our faculty when I went back in 'eighteen, and they'd put a new headmaster in, a Doctor Herbules. Fellows were leaving right and left, enlisting from the campus or being called by draft boards, and I was pretty miserable. One day as I was walking back from science lab., I ran full-tilt into old Herbules.

" 'What's the matter, Balderson?' he asked. 'You look as if you'd lost your last friend.'

" 'Well, I have, almost,' I answered. 'With so many fellows off at training-camp, having all kinds of excitement——'

" 'You want excitement, eh?' he interrupted. 'I can give it to you; such excitement as you've never dreamed of. I can make you——' He stopped abruptly, and it seemed to me he looked ashamed of something, but he'd got my curiosity roused.

" 'You're on, sir,' I told him. 'What is it, a prize-fight?'

"Herbules was queer. Everybody said so. He couldn't have been much past thirty; yet his hair was almost snow-white and there was a funny sort o' peaceful expression on his smooth face that reminded me of something that I couldn't quite identify. He had the schoolmaster's trick of speaking with a sort of pedantic precision, and he never raised his voice; yet when he spoke in chapel we could understand him perfectly, no matter how far from the platform we were sitting. I'd never seen him show signs of excitement before, but now he was breathing hard and was in such deadly earnest that his lips were fairly trembling. 'What do you most want from life?' he asked me in a whisper.

" 'Why, I don't know, just now I'd like best of all to get into the Army; I'd like to go to France and bat around with the mademoiselles, and get drunk any time I wanted——'

" 'You'd like that sort of thing?' he laughed. 'I can give it to you, and more; more than you ever imagined. Wine and song and gayety and women—beautiful, lovely, cultured women, not the street-trulls that you'd meet in France—you can have all this and more, if you want to, Balderson.'

" 'Lead me to it,' I replied. 'When do we start?'

" Ah, my boy, nothing's given for nothing. There are some things you'll have to do, some promises to make, something to be paid——"

" 'All right; how much?' I asked. Dad was liberal with me. I had a hundred dollars every month for spending money, and I could always get as much again from Mother if I worked it right.

" 'No, no; not money,' he almost laughed in my face. 'The price of all this can't be paid in money. All we ask is that you give the Master something which I greatly doubt you realize you have, my boy.'

"It sounded pretty cock-eyed to me, but if the old boy really had something up his sleeve I wanted to know about it. 'Count me in,' I told him. 'What do I do next?"

"There was no one within fifty yards of us, but he bent until his lips were almost in my ear before he whispered: "Next Wednesday at midnight, come to my house.'

" 'Private party, or could I bring a friend or two?'

"His features seemed to freeze. 'Who is the friend?' he asked.

" 'Well, I'd like to bring Eldridge and Trivers, and maybe Atkins, too. They're all pretty good eggs, and I know they crave excitement——'

" 'Oh, by all means, yes. Be sure to bring them. It's agreed, then? Next Wednesday night at twelve, at my house.'

'HERBULES was waiting for us in a perfect fever of excitement when we tiptoed up his front-porch steps on Wednesday night. He had a domino and mask for each of us. The dominoes were fiery red, with hoods that pulled up like monks' cowls; the masks were black, and hideous. They represented long, thin faces with out-jutting chins; the lips were purple and set in horrid grins; the eyebrows were bright scarlet wool and at the top there was another patch of bright red worsted curled and cut to simulate a fringe of hair. 'Good Lord,' said Atkins as he tried his on, 'I look just like the Devil!'

"I thought that Herbules would have a stroke when he heard Atkins speak. 'You'll use that name with more respect after tonight, my boy,' he said.

"After that we all got in his car and drove down toward Red Bank.

"We stopped about a mile outside of town and parked the car in a small patch of woods, walked some distance down the road, climbed a fence and cut across a field till we reached an old deserted house. I'd seen the place as I drove past, and had often wondered why it was unoccupied, for it stood up on a hill surrounded by tall trees and would have made an ideal summer home, but I'd been told its well was dry, and as there was no other source of water, nobody wanted it.

"We didn't go to the front door, but tiptoed round the back, where Herbules struck three quick raps, waited for a moment, then knocked four more. "We'd all put on our robes and masks while he was knocking, and when the door was opened on a crack we saw the porter was robed and masked as we were. Nobody said a word, and we walked through a basement entrance, down a long and narrow hall, and turned a corner where we met another door. Here Herbules went through the same procedure, and the door swung back to let us in.

"We were in a big room, twenty by forty feet, I guess, and we knew it was a cellar by the smell—stiflingly close, but clammy as a tomb at once. Rows of folding chairs like those used at bridge games —or funerals—were arranged in double rows with a passage like an aisle between, and at the farther end of the big room we saw an altar.

"In all my life I don't believe I'd been to church ten times, but we were nominally Protestants, so what I saw had less effect on me than if I'd been a Catholic or Episcopalian; but I knew at once the altar wasn't regulation. Oh, it was sufficiently impressive, but it had a sort of comic—no, not comic, grotesque, rather —note about it. A reredos of black cloth was hung against the wall, and before it stood a heavy table more than eight feet long and at least six wide, covered by a black cloth edged with white. It reminded me of something, though I couldn't quite identify it for a moment; then I knew. I'd seen a Jewish funeral once, and this cloth was like the black-serge pall they used to hide the plain pine coffin! At each end of the altar stood a seven-branched candelabrum made of brass, each with a set of tall black candles in it. These were burning and gave off a pale blue glow. They seemed to be perfumed, too, and the odor which they burned with was pleasant—at first. Then, as I sniffed a second time it seemed to me there was a faint suspicion of a stench about it, something like the fetor that you smell if you're driving down the road and pass a dog or cat that's been run over and has lain a while out in the sun—just a momentary whiff, but nauseating, just the same. Between the candelabra, right exactly in the center of the altar, but back against the wall, was a yard-high crucifix of some black wood with an ivory figure

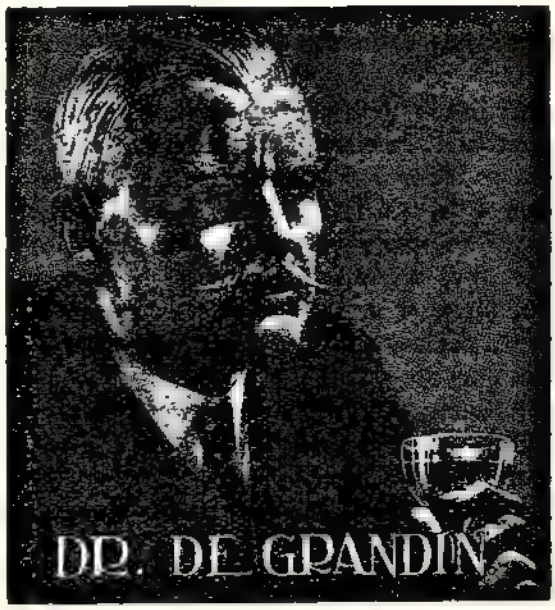
on it, upside down. Before the cross there was a silver wine goblet and a box of gilt inlay about the size and shape of a lady's powder-puff box.

"I heard Atkins catch his breath and give a sort of groan. He'd been brought up an Episcopalian and knew about such things. He turned half round to leave, but I caught him by the sleeve.

" 'Come on, you fool, don't be a sissy!' I admonished, and next moment we were all so interested that he had no thought of leaving.

"There was a sort of congregation in the chapel; every seat was occupied by someone masked and robed just as we were, save three vacant places by the altar steps. These, we knew, were kept for us, but when we looked about for Herbules he was nowhere to be seen; so we went forward to our seats alone. We could hear a hum of whispering as we walked up the aisle, and we knew some of the voices were from women; but who was man and who was woman was impossible to tell, for each one looked just like his neighbor in his shrouding robe.

"THE whispering suddenly became intense, like the susurrus of a hive of swarming bees. Every neck seemed suddenly to crane, every eye to look in one direction, and as we turned our glances toward the right side of the cellar we saw a woman entering through a curtained doorway. She wore a long, loose scarlet cape which she held together with one hand, her hair was very black, her eyes were large and luminously dark, seeming to have a glance of overbearing sensuousness and sweet humility at once. Her white, set face was an imponderable mask; her full red lips were fixed in an uneven, bitter line. Beneath the hem of her red cloak we saw the small feet in the golden, high-heeled slippers were unstockinged. As she neared the altar she



sank low in genuflection, then wheeled about and faced us. For a moment she stood there, svelte, graceful, mysteriously beautiful with that thin white face and scarlet lips so like a mask; then with a sudden kicking motion she unshod her feet, opened wide her cloak and let it fall in scarlet billows on the dull-black carpet of the altar steps.

"She was so beautiful it almost hurt the eyes to look at her as she stood there in white silhouette against the ebon background of the black-draped altar, with her narrow, boy-like hips, slim thighs and full, high, pointed breasts. She was a thing of snow and fire, her body palely cool and virginal, her lips like flame, her eyes like embers blazing when a sudden wind stirs them to brightness.

"The modern strip-tease routine was unthought of in those days, and though I was sophisticated far beyond my eighteen years I had never seen a woman in the nude before. The flame of her raced in my blood and crashed against my brain with almost numbing impact. I felt myself go faint and sick with sudden weakness and desire.

"A long-drawn sigh came from the audience; then the tableau was abruptly broken as the girl turned from us, mounted nimbly to the black-draped altar and stretched herself full length upon it, crossed her ankles and thrust her arms out right and left, so that her body made a white cross on the sable altar-cloth. Her eyes were closed as though in peaceful sleep, but her bosoms rose and fell with her tumultuous breathing. She had become the altar!

"Silence fell upon the congregation like a shadow, and next instant Herbules came in. He wore a priest's vestments, a long red cassock, over it the alb and stole, and in his hand he bore a small red book. Behind him came his acolyte, but it was not an altar-boy. It was a girl, slender, copper-haired, *petite*. She wore a short surcoat of scarlet, cut low around the shoulders, sleeveless, reaching just below the hips, like the tabards worn by mediæval heralds. Over it she wore a lace-edged cotta. Otherwise she was unclothed. We could hear the softly-slapping patter of her small bare feet upon the altar-sill as she changed her place from side to side, genuflecting as she passed the reversed crucifix. She swung a brazen censer to and fro before her and the gray smoke curled in spurting puffs from it, filling the entire place with a perfume like that generated by the candles, but stronger, more intense, intoxicating.

"Herbules began the service with a muttered Latin prayer, and though he seemed to follow a set ritual even I could see it was not that prescribed by any church, for when he knelt he did so with his back turned toward the altar; when he crossed himself he did it with the thumb of his left hand, and made the sign beginning at the bottom, rather than the top. But even in this mummers' parody the service was majestic. I could feel its power and compulsion as it swept on toward its climax. Herbules took up the silver chalice and held it high above his head, then rested it upon the living altar, placing it between her breasts, and we could see the flesh around her nails grow white as she grasped the black-palled altar table with her fingers. Her body, shining palely on the coffin-pall under the flickering candles' light, was arched up like a tauted bow, she shook as if a sudden chill had seized her, and from her tight-drawn, scarlet lips there issued little whimpering sounds, not cries nor yet quite groans, but something which partook of both, and at the same time made me think of the soft, whining sounds a new-born puppy makes.

"The kneeling acolyte chimed a sacring-bell and the congregation bent and swayed like a wheat-field swept across by sudden wind.

"When all was finished we were bidden to come forward and kneel before the altar steps. Herbules came down and stood above us, and each of us was made to kiss the red book which he held and take a fearful oath, swearing that he would abstain from good and embrace evil, serve Satan faithfully and well, and do his best to bring fresh converts to the worship of the Devil. Should we in any manner break our oath, we all agreed that Satan might at once foreclose upon his mortgage on our souls, and bear us still alive to hell, and the sign that we were come for was to be the odor of the perfume which the candles and the censer gave that night.

"When this ritual was finished we were bidden name our dearest wish, and told it would be granted. I could hear the others mumble something, but could not understand their words. I don't know what possessed me when it came my turn to ask a boon of Satan—possibly he put the thought into my mind, maybe it was my longing to get out of school and go

to France before the war was ended. At any rate, when Herbules bent over me I muttered, 'I wish the pater would bump off.'

"He leaned toward me with a smile and whispered, 'You begin your postulancy well, my son,' then held his hand out to me, signifying that I should return his clasp with both of mine. As I put out my hands to take his I saw by my wrist-watch that it was exactly half-past twelve.

"What followed was the wildest party I had ever seen or dreamt of. The farmhouse windows had been boarded up and curtained, and inside the rooms were literally ablaze with light. Men and women, some draped in their red dominoes, some in evening dress, some naked as the moment that they first drew breath, mingled in a perfect saturnalia of unrestrained salacity. On tables stood ice-buckets with champagne, and beside them tall decanters of cut glass filled with port and sherry, tokay, madeira, muscatel and malaga. Also there was bottled brandy, vodka and whisky, trays of cigarettes, boxes of cigars, sandwiches, cake and sweetmeats. It was like the carnival at New Orleans, only ten times gayer, madder, more abandoned. I was grasped by naked men and women, whirled furiously around in a wild dance, then let go only to be seized by some new partner and spun around until I almost fell from dizziness. Between times I drank, mixing wine and spirits without thought, stuffed sandwiches and cake and candy in my mouth, then drank fresh drafts of chilled champagne or sharp-toned brandy.

"Staggering drunkenly about the table I was reaching for another glass when I felt a hand upon my shoulder. Turning, I beheld a pair of flashing eyes laughing at me through the peep-holes of a mask. 'Come with me, my neophyte,' the masked girl whispered; 'there is still a chalice you have left untasted.'

"She pulled me through the crowd, led me up the stairs and thrust a door ajar. The little room we entered was entirely oriental. A Persian lamp hung like a blazing ruby from the ceiling, on the floor were thick, soft rugs and piles of down-filled pillows. There was no other furniture.

"With a laugh she turned her back to me, motioning me to slip the knot which held the girdle of her domino; then she bent her head while I withdrew the pins that held her hair. It rippled in a cascade to her waist—below, nearly to her knees—black and glossy as the plumage of a grackle's throat, and as it cataracted down she swung around, shrugging her shoulders quickly, and let the scarlet domino fall from her. An upswing of her hand displaced the black-faced, purple, grinning mask, and I looked directly in the face of the pale girl who half an hour earlier had lain upon the altar of the Devil. 'Kiss me!' she commanded. 'Kiss me!' Her arms were tight about my neck, pulling my lips to hers, drawing her slender, unclothed body tight against me. Her lips clung to my mouth as though they were a pair of scarlet leeches; through her half-closed lids I saw the glimmer of her bright black eyes, burning like twin points of quenchless fire. . . .

"It was daylight when we reached the dorm next day, and all of us reported sick at chapel. Sometime about eleven, as I rose to get a drink of water, a knock came at my door. It was a telegram that stated:

> Father dropped dead in his study at twelve forty-five. Come. MOTHER.

"I hurried back to school as soon as possible. My father's death had startled—frightened—me, but I put it down to coincidence. He'd been suffering from Bright's disease for several years, and

probably his number'd just turned up, I told myself. Besides, the longing for the celebration of the sacrilegious Mass with its sensual stimulation, followed by the orgiastic parties, had me in a grip as strong as that which opium exerts upon its addicts.

"Twice a week, each Wednesday and Friday, my three friends and I attended the salacious services held in the old farmhouse cellar, followed by the revels in the upper rooms, and bit by bit we learned about our fellow cultists. Herbules, the head and center of the cult, was a priest stripped of his orders. Pastor of a parish in the suburbs of Vienna, he had dabbled in the Black Art, seduced a number of his congregation from their faith, finally celebrated the Black Mass. The ecclesiastical authorities unfrocked him, the civil government jailed him on a morals charge, but disgrace could not impair his splendid education or his brilliant mind, and as soon as his imprisonment was over he emigrated to America and at once secured a post as teacher. Though his talents were unquestionable, his morals were not, and scandal followed every post he held. He was at the end of his string when he managed to worm his way into the Horton trustees' confidence and secured the post left vacant by the former headmaster's entrance in the Army.

"Our companion Devil-worshippers were mostly college and preparatory students looking for a thrill, now tangled in the net of fascination that the cult spun round its devotees, but a few of them were simply vicious, while others turned to demonolatry because they had lost faith in God.

"One of these was Marescha Nurmi, the girl who acted as the living altar. She was my constant partner at the orgies, and bit by bit I learned her history. Only nineteen, she was the victim of a heart affection and the doctors gave her but a year to live. When they pronounced sentence she was almost prostrated; then in desperation she turned to religion, going every day to church and spending hours on her knees in private prayer. But medical examination showed her illness was progressing, and when she chanced to hear of Herbules' devil-cult she came to it. 'I'm too young, too beautiful to die!' she told me as we lay locked in each others' arms one night. 'Why should God take my life? I never injured Him. All right, if He won't have me, Satan will. He'll give me life and happiness and power, let me live for years and years; keep me young and beautiful when all these snivelling Christian girls are old and faded. What do I care if I go to hell to pay for it? I'll take my heaven here on earth, and when the bill's presented I won't welch!'

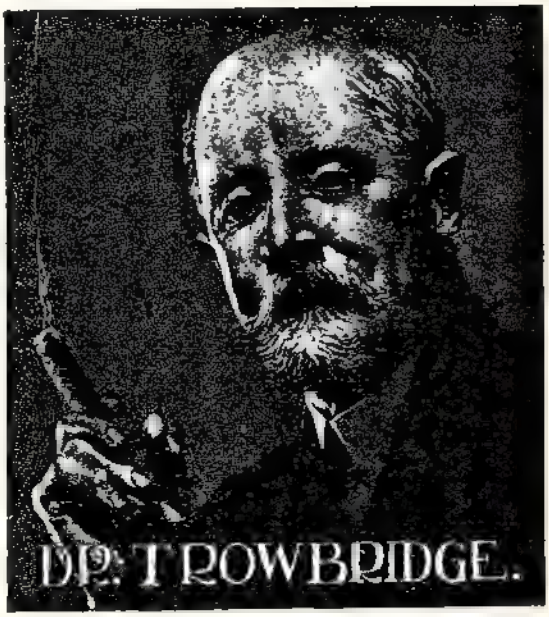
"There's an old saying that each time God makes a beautiful woman the Devil opens a new page in his ledger. He must have had to put in a whole set of books when Marescha was converted to our cult. She was attractive as a witch, had no more conscience than a snake, and positively burned with ardor to do evil. Night after night she brought new converts to the cult, sometimes young men, sometimes girls. 'Come on, you little fool,' I heard her urge a girl who shrank from the wild orgy following initiation. 'Take off your robe; that's what we're here for. This is our religion, the oldest in the world; it's revolt against the goody-goodies, revolt against the narrowness of God; we live for pleasure and unbridled passion instead of abnegation and renunciation—life and love and pleasure in a world of vivid scarlet, instead of fear and dreariness in a world all cold and gray. That's our creed and faith. We're set apart, we're marked for pleasure, we worshippers of Satan.' "

"*Tiens,* the lady was a competent saleswoman," de Grandin murmured. "Did she realize her dreams?"

The laugh that prefaced Balderson's reply was like the echo of a chuckle in a vaulted tomb. "I don't know if she got her money's worth, but certainly she paid," he answered. "It was nearing graduation time, and the celebrations were about to stop until the fall, for it would be impossible to keep the farmhouse windows shuttered so they'd show no gleam of light, especially with so many people on the roads in summer. Herbules had just completed invocation, raised the chalice overhead and set it on Marescha's breast when we saw her twitch convulsively. The little whimpering animal-cries she always made when the climax of the obscene parody was reached gave way to a choked gasping, and we saw the hand that clutched the altar-table suddenly relax. She raised her head and stared around the chapel with a look that sent the chill of horror rippling through me, then cried out in a strangled voice: 'O Lord, be pitiful!' Then she fell back on the coffin-pall that draped the altar and her fingers dangled loosely on its edge, her feet uncrossed and lay beside each other.

"HERBULES was going on as if nothing had happened, but the woman who sat next to me let out a sudden wail. 'Look at her,' she screamed. 'Look at her face!'

"Marescha's head had turned a little to one side, and we saw her features in the altar-candles' light. Her dark hair had come unbound and fell about her face as though it sought to hide it. Her eyes were not quite closed, nor fully open, for a thread of gray eyeball was visible between the long black lashes. Her mouth was partly open, not as though she breathed through it, but lax, slack,



as though she were exhausted. Where a line of white defined the lower teeth we saw her tongue had fallen forward, lying level with the full, red lip.

"Somewhere in the rear of the chapel another woman's voice, shrilly pitched, but controlled, cried out: 'She's dead!'

"There was a wave of movement in the worshippers. Chairs were overturned, gowns rustled, whispered questions buzzed like angry bees. Then the woman sitting next me screamed again: 'This is no natural death, no illness killed her; she's been stricken dead for sacrilege, she's sacrificed for our sins—fly, fly before the wrath of God blasts all of us!'

"Herbules stood at the altar facing us. A mask as of some inner feeling, of strange, forbidden passions, of things that raced on scurrying feet within his brain, seemed to drop across his features. His face seemed old and ancient, yet at the same time ageless; his eyes took on a glaze like polished agate. He raised both hands above his head, the fingers flexed like talons, and laughed as if at some dark jest known only to himself. 'Whoso leaves the temple of his Lord without

partaking of this most unholy sacrament, the same will Satan cast aside, defenseless from the vengeance of an outraged God!' he cried.

"Then I knew. Karl Erik Herbules, renegade Christian priest, brilliant scholar, poisoner of souls and votary of Satan, was mad as any Tom o' Bedlam!

"He stood there by the Devil's altar hurling curses at us, threatening us with Heaven's vengeance, casting an anathema upon us with such vile insults and filthy language as a fishwife would not dare to use.

"But panic had the congregation by the throat. They pushed and fought and scratched and bit like frenzied cats, clawing and slashing at one another till they gained the exit, then rushing pellmell down the hill to their parked cars without a backward look, leaving Herbules alone beside the altar he had raised to Satan, with the dead girl stretched upon it.

"There was no chance that Herbules would help. He kept reciting passages from the Black Mass, genuflecting to the altar, filling and refilling the wine-cup and stuffing his mouth with the wafers meant to parody the Host. So Trivers, Eldridge, Atkins and I took Marescha's body to the river, weighted it with window-irons and dropped it in the water. But the knots we tied must have been loose, or else the weights were insufficient, for as we turned to leave, her body floated almost to the surface and one white arm raised above the river's glassy face, as though to wave a mute farewell. It must have been a trick the current played as the tide bore her away, but to us it seemed that her dead hand pointed to us each in turn; certainly there was no doubt it bobbed four times above the river's surface before the swirling waters sucked it out of sight.

"You've probably heard garbled rumors of what happened afterward. The farmhouse burned that night, and because there was no water to be had, there was no salvage. Still, a few things were not utterly destroyed, and people in the neighborhood still wonder how those Persian lamps and brazen candlesticks came to be in that deserted house.

"Herbules committed suicide that night, and when the auditors went over his accounts they found he'd practically wrecked Horton. There was hardly a cent left, for he'd financed his whole grisly farce of Devil worship with the money he embezzled. The trustees made the losses good and gave up in disgust. Ours was the last class graduated.

"They found Marescha's body floating in the Shrewsbury two days later, and at first the coroner was sure she'd been the victim of a murder; for while the window-weights had fallen off, the cords that tied them were still knotted round her ankles. When the autopsy disclosed she'd not been drowned, but had been put into the river after death from heart disease, the mystery was deepened, but until tonight only four people knew its answer. Now there are only three."

"Three, *Monsieur?*" de Grandin asked.

"That's right. Trivers, Atkins and Eldridge are dead. I'm still here, and you and Doctor Trowbridge——"

"Your figures are at fault, my friend. You forget we are physicians, and your narrative was given us in confidence."

"But see here," I asked as the silence lengthened, "what is there about all this to make you want to kill yourself? If you'd been grown men when you joined these Devil-worshippers it would have been more serious, but college boys are always in some sort of mischief, and this all happened twenty years ago. You say you are sincerely sorry for it, and after all, the leaders in the movement died, so——"

Balderson broke through my moralizing with a short, hard laugh. "Men die

more easily than memories, Doctor. Besides——"

"Yes, *Monsieur,* besides?" de Grandin prompted as our guest stared silently into the study fire.

"Do you believe the spirits of the dead—the dead who are in Hell, or at least cut off from Heaven—can come back to plague the living?" he demanded.

DE GRANDIN brushed the ends of his small waxed mustache with that gesture which always reminded me of a tomcat combing his whiskers. "You have experienced such a visitation?"

"I have. So did the others."

"Mordieu! How was it?"

"You may remember reading that Ted Eldridge hanged himself? Three days before it happened, he met me on the street, and I could see that he was almost frantic. 'I saw Marescha last night!' he told me in a frightened whisper.

" 'Marescha? You must be off your rocker, man! We put her in the Shrewsbury——'

" 'And she's come back again. Remember the perfume of the candles and the incense Herbules used in celebrating the Black Mass? I'd come home from New York last night, and was getting ready for a drink before I went to bed, when I began to smell it. At first I thought it was some fool trick that my senses played on me, but the scent kept getting stronger. It seemed as if I were back in that dreadful chapel with the tall black candles burning and the hellish incense smoldering, Herbules in his red vestments and Marescha lying naked on the altar—I could almost hear the chanting of inverted prayers and the little whimpering noises that she made. I gulped my drink down in two swallows and turned round. She was standing there, with water on her face and streaming from her hair, and her hands held out to me——'

" 'You're crazy as a goat!' I told him. 'Come have a drink.'

"He looked at me a moment, then turned away, walking quickly down the street and muttering to himself.

"I'd not have thought so much about it if I hadn't read about his suicide next day, and if Stanley Trivers hadn't called me on the telephone. 'Hear about Ted Eldridge?' he asked the moment I had said hello. When I told him I'd just read about it he demanded: 'Did you see him—recently?'

" 'Yes, ran into him in Broad Street yesterday,' I answered.

" 'Seemed worried, didn't he? Did he tell you anything about Marescha?'

" 'Say, what is this?' I asked. 'Did he say anything to you——'

" 'Yes, he did, and I thought he had a belfry full o' bats.'

" 'There's not much doubt the poor old lad was cuckoo——'

" 'That's where you're mistaken, Balderson. According to the paper he'd been dead for something like four hours when they found him. That would have made it something like four o'clock when he died.'

" 'So what?'

" 'So this: I waked up at four o'clock this morning, and the room was positively stifling with the odor of the incense they used in the Black Chapel——'

" 'Yeah? I suppose you saw Marescha, too?'

" 'I did! She was standing by my bed, with water streaming from her face and body, and tears were in her eyes.'

"I tried to talk him out of it, tell him that it was a trick of his imagination stimulated by Ted Eldridge's wild talk, but he insisted that he'd really seen her. Two days later he committed suicide.

"Don Atkins followed. I didn't talk

with him before he shot himself, but I'll wager that he saw her, too, and smelled that Devil's incense."

De Grandin looked at me with upraised brows, then shook his head to caution silence ere he turned to face our guest. "And you, *Monsieur?*" he asked.

"Yes, I too. Don killed himself sometime in early afternoon, and I was home that day. I'd say that it was shortly after two, for I'd lunched at the City Club and come home to pack a bag and take a trip to Nantakee. I had the highboy open and was taking out some shirts when I began to notice a strange odor in the air. But it wasn't strange for long; as it grew stronger I recognized it as the scent of Herbules' incense. It grew so strong that it was almost overpowering. I stood there by the chest of drawers, smelling the increasing scent, and determined that I'd not turn round. You know how Coleridge puts it:

> Like one, that on a lonesome road
> Doth walk in fear and dread,
> And having once turned round, walks on,
> And turns no more his head;
> Because he knows a frightful fiend
> Doth close behind him tread . . .

"The odor of the incense grew until I could have sworn somebody swung a censer right behind me. Then, suddenly, I heard the sound of falling water. *'Drip—drip—drip!'* it fell upon the floor, drop by deliberate drop. The suspense was more than I could bear, and I wheeled about.

"Marescha stood behind me, almost close enough to touch. Water trickled from the hair that hung in gleaming strands across her breast and shoulders, it hung in little gleaming globules on her pale, smooth skin, ran in little rivulets across her forehead, down her beautifully shaped legs, made tiny puddles on the polished floor beside each slim bare foot. I went almost sick with horror as I saw the knotted cords we'd used to tie the window-weights on her still bound about her ankles, water oozing from their coils. She did not seem dead. Her lovely slender body seemed as vital as when I had held it in my arms, her full and mobile lips were red with rouge, her eyes were neither set and staring nor expressionless. But they were sad, immeasurably sad. They seemed to probe into my spirit's very depths, asking, beseeching, entreating. And to make their plea more eloquent, she slowly raised her lovely hands and held them out to me, palms upward, fingers slightly curled, as though she besought alms.

"There was a faint resemblance to her bitter, crooked smile upon her lips, but it was so sad, so hopelessly entreating, that it almost made me weep to see it.

" 'Mar——' I began, but the name stuck in my throat. This couldn't be the body that I'd held against my heart, those lips were not the lips I'd kissed a thousand times; this was no girl of flesh and blood. Marescha lay deep in a grave in Shadow Lawns Cemetery; had lain there almost twenty years. Dust had filled those sad, entreating eyes long before the college freshmen of this year were born. The worms . . .

"Somewhere I had heard that if you called upon the Trinity a ghost would vanish. 'In the name of the Father——' I began, but it seemed as if a clap of thunder sounded in my ears.

" 'What right have you to call upon the Triune God?' a mighty voice seemed asking. 'You who have mocked at Heaven, taken every sacred name in vain, made a jest of every holy thing—how dare you invoke Deity? Your sacrilegious lips cannot pronounce the sacred name!'

"And it was true. I tried again, but the words clogged in my throat; I tried to force them out, but only strangling inarticulacies sounded.

"Marescha's smile was almost pityingly

tender, but still she stood there pleading, entreating, begging me, though what it was she wanted I could not divine. I threw my arm across my eyes to shut the vision out, but when I took it down she was still there, and still the water dripped from her entreating hands, ran in little courses from her dankly-hanging hair, fell drop by drop from the sopping cords that ringed her ankles.

"I STUMBLED blindly from the house and walked the streets for hours. Presently I bought a paper, and the headlines told me Donald Atkins had been found, a suicide, in his apartment.

"When I reached my house again the incense still hung in the air, but the vision of Marescha was not there. I drank almost a pint of brandy, neat, and fell across my bed. When I recovered from my alcoholic stupor Marescha stood beside me, her great eyes luminous with tears, her hands outstretched in mute entreaty.

"She's been with me almost every waking instant since that night. I drank myself into oblivion, but every time I sobered she was standing by me. I'd walk the streets for hours, but every time I halted she would be there, always silent, always with her hands held out, always with that look of supplication in her tear-filled eyes. I'd rush at her and try to drive her off with blows and kicks. She seemed to float away, staying just outside my reach, however savagely I ran at her, and though I cursed her, using every foul word I knew, she never changed expression, never showed resentment; just stood and looked at me with sad, imploring eyes, always seeming to be begging me for something.

"I can't endure it any longer, gentlemen. Tonight she stood beside me when I halted on North Bridge, and I'd have been at peace by now if you'd not come along——"

"Non, there you are mistaken, *mon ami,"* de Grandin contradicted. "Had you carried your intention out and leaped into the river you would have sealed your doom irrevocably. Instead of leaving her you would have joined her for eternity."

"All right," Balderson asked raspingly, "I suppose you have a better plan?"

"I think I have," the little Frenchman answered. "First, I would suggest you let us give you sedatives. You will not be troubled while you sleep, and while you rest we shall be active."

"SHAKESPEARE was right," I said as we left our patient sleeping from a dose of chloral hydrate. "Conscience does make cowards of us all. The memory of that early indiscretion has haunted that quartet of worthless youngsters twenty years. No wonder they kept seeing that poor girl after they'd thrown her so callously into the Shrewsbury. Of all the heartless, despicable things——"

He emerged from a brown study long enough to interrupt: "And is your conscience clean, my friend?"

"What has my conscience to do with it? I didn't throw a dead girl in the river; I didn't——"

"Précisément, neither did the good Costello, yet both of you described the odor of that Devil's incense: Costello when he went to view the bodies of the suicides, you when we halted Monsieur Balderson's attempt at self-destruction. Were you also haunted by that scent, or were you not?"

"I smelled it," I responded frigidly, "but I wasn't haunted by it. Just what is it you're driving at?"

"That the odor of that incense, or even the perception of the dead Marescha's *revenant,* is no optical illusion caused by guilty conscience. It is my firm conviction that the apparition which appeared to these unfortunate young men was the

earthbound spirit of a girl who begged a boon from them."

"Then you don't think that she haunted them because they'd thrown her body in the river?"

"Entirely no. I think she came to ask their help, and in their fear and horror at beholding her they could not understand her plea. First one and then another, lashed with the scorpion-whip of an accusing conscience, destroyed himself because he dared not look into her pleading eyes, thinking they accused him of mistreating her poor body, when all the *pauvre belle créature* asked was that they help her to secure release from her earthbound condition."

"Why should she have appealed to them?"

"In all that congregation of benighted worshippers of evil, she knew them best. They saw her die, they gave her body sepulture; one of them, at least, had been her lover, and was, presumably, bound to her by ties of mutual passion. She was most strongly in their minds and memories. It was but natural that she should appeal to them for succor. Did not you notice one outstanding fact in all the testimony—the poor Marescha appeared to them in turn, looking not reproachfully, but pleadingly? Her lips were held, she might not put her plea in words. She could but come to them as they had last beheld her, entreat them by dumb show, and hope that they would understand. One by one they failed her; one by one they failed to understand——"

"Well, is there anything that we can do about it?"

"I think there is. Come, let us be upon our way."

"Where the deuce——"

"To the rectory of St. Chrysostom. I would interview the Reverend Doctor Bentley."

"At this time of night?"

"*Mais certainement,* clergymen and doctors, they have no privacy, my friend. Surely, you need not be told that."

The freshly lighted fire burned brightly in the Reverend Peter Bentley's study, the blue smoke spiraled upward from the tips of our cigars, the gray steam curled in fragrant clouds from the glasses of hot Scotch which stood upon the coffee-table. Looking anything but clerical in red-flannel bathrobe, black pajamas and red Turkish slippers, Doctor Bentley listened with surprizing tolerance to de Grandin's argument.

"But it seems the poor girl died in mortal sin," he murmured, obviously more in sorrow than in righteous indignation. "According to your statement, her last frantic words called on the Devil to fulfill his bargain: 'O Lord, be pitiful——' "

"*Précisément, mon père,* but who can say her prayer was made to Satan? True, those so bewildered, misled followers of evil were wont to call the Devil Lord and Master, but is it not entirely possible that she repented and addressed her dying prayer to the real Lord of the heaven and earth? Somewhere an English poet says of the last-minute prayer of a not-wholly-righteous fox-hunter who was unhorsed and broke his sinful neck:

> *Betwixt the stirrup and the ground*
> *I mercy asked; mercy I found.*

"Me, I believe in all sincerity that her repentance was as true as that the thief upon the cross expressed; that in the last dread moment she perceived the grievous error of her ways and made at once confession of sin and prayer for pity with her dying breath.

"But she had bent the knee at Satan's shrine. With her fair body—that body which was given her to wear as if it were a garment to the greater glory of the Lord—she parodied the sacred faircloth of the

altar. By such things she had cut herself adrift, she had put herself beyond communion with the righteous which is the blessèd company of all the faithful. There was no priest to shrive her sin-encumbered soul, no one to read words of forgiveness and redemption above her lifeless clay. Until some one of her companions in iniquity will perform the service of contrition for her, until the office for the burial of Christian dead is read above her grave, she lies excommunicate and earthbound. She cannot even expiate her faults in Purgatory till forgiveness of sins has been formally pronounced. Sincerely repentant, hell is not for her; unshrived, and with no formal statement of conditional forgiveness, she cannot quit the earth, but must wander here among the scenes of her brief and sadly misspent life. Do we dare withhold our hands to save her from a fate like that?"

Doctor Bentley sipped thoughtfully at his hot Scotch. "There may be something in your theory," he admitted. "I'm not especially strong on doctrine, but I can't believe the fathers of the early church were the crude nincompoops some of our modern theologians call them. They preached posthumous absolution, and there are instances recorded where excommunicated persons who had hovered round the scenes they'd known in life were given rest and peace when absolution was pronounced above their graves. Tell me, is this Balderson sincerely sorry for his misdeeds?"

"I could swear it, *mon père.*"

"Then bring him to the chapel in the morning. If he will make confession and declare sincere repentance, then submit himself to holy baptism, I'll do what you request. It's rather mediæval, but—I'd hate to think that I'm so modern that I would not take a chance to save two souls."

The penitential service in the Chapel of the Intercession was a brief but most impressive one. Only Balderson, I and de Grandin occupied the pews, with Doctor Bentley in his stole and cassock, but without his surplice, at the little altar:

". . . we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against Thy holy laws . . . remember not, Lord, our offenses nor the offenses of our forefathers, neither take Thou vengeance of our sins . . . we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickednesses; the memory of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable . . ."

After absolution followed the short service ordered for the baptism of adults; then we set out for Shadow Lawns.

Now Doctor Bentley wore his full canonicals, and his surplice glinted almost whiter than the snow that wrapped the mounded graves as he paused beside an unmarked hillock in the Nurmi family plot.

Slowly he began in that low, full voice with which he fills a great church to its farthest corner: "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. . . ."

It was one of those still winter days, quieter than an afternoon in August, for no chirp of bird or whir of insect sounded. no breath of breeze disturbed the evergreens; yet as he read the opening sentence of the office for the burial of the dead a low wail sounded in the copse of yew and hemlock on the hill, as though a sudden wind moaned in the branches, and I stiffened as a scent was borne across the snow-capped grave mounds. Incense! Yet not exactly incense, either. There was an undertone of fetor in it, a faint, distinctly charnel smell. Balderson was trembling, and despite myself I flinched,

but Doctor Bentley and de Grandin gave no sign of recognition.

"Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts, shut not Thy merciful ears to our prayer, but spare us, Lord most holy . . ." intoned the clergyman, and,

"Amen," said Jules de Grandin firmly as the prayer concluded.

The Æolian wailing in the evergreens died to a sobbing, low clamation as Doctor Bentley traced in sand a cross upon the snow-capped grave, declaring: "Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of our departed sister, and we commit her body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the *sure and certain hope of the Resurrection into eternal life. . . .*"

And now there was no odor of corruption in the ghostly perfume, but the clean, inspiring scent of frankincense, redolent of worship at a thousand consecrated altars.

As the last amen was said and Doctor Bentley turned away I could have sworn I heard a gentle slapping sound and saw the blond hairs of de Grandin's small mustache bend inward, as though a pair of lips invisible to me had kissed him on the mouth.

DOCTOR BENTLEY dined with us that night, and over coffee and liqueurs we discussed the case.

"It was a fine thing you did," the cleric told de Grandin. "Six men in seven would have sent him packing and bid him work out his salvation—or damnation—for himself. There's an essential nastiness in Devil-worship which is revolting to the average man, not to mention its abysmal wickedness——"

"*Tiens,* who of us can judge another's wickedness?" the little Frenchman answered. "The young man was repentant, and repentance is the purchase price of heavenly forgiveness. Besides"—a look of strain, like a nostalgic longing, came into his eyes—"before the altar of a convent in *la belle France* kneels one whom I have loved as I can never love another in this life. Ceaselessly, except the little time she sleeps, she makes prayer and intercession for a sinful world. Could I hold fast the memory of our love if I refused to match in works the prayer she makes in faith? *Eh bien, mon père,* my inclination was to give him a smart kick in the posterior; to bid him go and sin no more, but sinfully or otherwise, to go. *Ha,* but I am strong, me. I overcame that inclination."

The earnestness of his expression faded and an impish grin replaced it as he poured a liberal potion of Napoléon 1811 in his brandy-sniffer. "Jules de Grandin," he apostrophized himself, "you have acted like a true man. You have overcome your natural desires; you have kept the faith.

"Jules de Grandin, my good and much-admired self — be pleased to take a drink!"

The Poets

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

Out of the somber night the poets come,
A moment brief to fan their lambent flame;
Then, like the dimming whisper of a drum,
Fade back into the night from whence they came.

The gray fog, swirling cloak of cynic Time,
Meshes achievement in the ages' glomb,
A moment's mirth, a breath of lilting rime,
And then—the gray of old oblivion's womb.

Weaver of melodies all golden-spun
The singer sings his song—and passes on.
The poet strums his lyre—then is one
With gray-hued dusk and rose of fading dawn.

A moment's laughter on the winds of Time,
A moment's ripple on Time's silent sea,
A golden riffle in the river's slime,
And then—the silence of Eternity.

Gray dust and ash where leaped the mystic fire,
Mingled with air and wind the once-red flame;
Breeze-borne the tune, but now forgot the lyre—
Remains?—the musty thing that men call Fame.

Half-curious eyes that scan the yellowed page,
All heedless of the makers of the feast—
Why, Pierrot might have been a musty sage,
François Villon a stoled and sour priest.

Who penned this lyric? Who this sonnet? Whence
The soul on fire that snared these stars in song?
Who knows? Who cares? A vast indifference
Is all the answer of the marching throng.

The Thing on the Floor

By THORP McCLUSKY

A strange story of an unscrupulous hypnotist and the frightful thing that he called Stepan, who was immune to destruction while his master lived

1. *Charlatan or Miracle-Man?*

"DARLING," Mary Roberts told her fiancé, "I'm sorry, but I won't be able to go to the Lily Pons recital Thursday night. Helen Stacey-Forbes insists that I go with her to Dmitri's."

Across the spotless linen and gleaming silver that graced their luncheon table Charles Ethredge's gray eyes questioned.

"It's a subscription concert, Mary. I've had the tickets for months."

Her slender right hand reached across the table to him. "I'm terribly sorry, Charles. But Helen has been after me for weeks to go, and Dmitri's evenings are always Thursdays——"

Ethredge grimaced. "I think it's rather silly of you two—this thrill visit to an obvious charlatan."

Mary shook her head. "Helen Stacey-Forbes doesn't think Dmitri a charlatan. She swears by the man—claims he's done wonders for Ronny."

Ethredge laughed. "Dmitri not a charlatan? With his half-baked parlor magic and that moving-picture brand of mysticism he exudes? I've heard all about him. Doc Hanlon says that if he isn't exposed pretty soon there'll be a major rabies epidemic among our local psychiatry."

For a moment Mary Roberts did not reply, but sat quietly, her delicately oval face profiled, her wide-set, limpid eyes thoughtful as she gazed musingly through the iron-grilled window at the row of dwarf evergreens in their stone window-box beneath the sill. Discreetly, from its palm-hidden sound shell on the mezzanine, the hotel's string quintet began to play a Strauss waltz. Abruptly Mary turned back to her fiancé, a strange little smile trembling on her lips.

"Oh, Charles, I wish that I could be so sure. Yes, you're probably right about Dmitri, darling. He's certainly theatrical enough—even Helen admits that. But you wouldn't want me to disappoint her, would you? And she *does* say he's saved Ronny's life."

"Lord," Ethredge grumbled, "I wish to heaven Dmitri didn't have that Vienna degree; we'd stop him so fast his teeth'd rattle. And by the way, where did Helen Stacey-Forbes get the crazy notion that he's helped Ronny? Good grief, that fellow's healthier than I am."

"Ronny's really been ill, Charles. It's not generally known, but he's a hemophiliac; he's had several severe hemorrhages within the past year. Dmitri's the only man who's been able to do anything for him."

Ethredge looked startled. "Why, I'd always thought hemophilia was hereditary; I've never heard of it in Ronny's family before. Two years ago, at the Wilmot's hunt, he was thrown, and pretty badly bruised and cut, but he was up and limping around the same evening. He even danced."

Mary shook her head. "I don't know; I'm no medical authority, Charles, but it's hemophilia, all right. It's been diagnosed as such several times within the past year. Why——"

But Charles Ethredge was not really listening. He was recalling some of the vague, ugly stories he had heard, in recent months, of Dmitri Vassilievitch Tulin—stories which could not *all* be put down to professional jealousy. And, curiously, he was thinking of the twenty-years-dead Tsarevitch, and of a mad monk named Gregori Rasputin. . . .

2 The Spider and the Flies

— and the man is a perfect ghoul about money. You know most of the people here, Mary; you wouldn't say that any were really poor, would you?"

Mary Roberts looked about this room in which she sat. It was a long room, extending the full length of the second floor of a brownstone, solidly aristocratic house; obviously two interior walls had been demolished to provide the single large chamber. The wall to Mary's left, abutting the adjoining house, was blank; red velvet drapes covered the windows

"Mary knew that it was Dmitri's voice, yet it sounded millions of miles away."

at the ends of the room. Three doors, irregularly spaced along the right-hand wall, led into the second-floor corridor. A ponderous oaken table and chair stood close to the drapes at one end of the room; about sixty folding-chairs were arranged in orderly rows facing these grimly utilitarian furnishings. Perhaps thirty persons, the great majority of whom were women, sat in small, self-conscious groups about the room, talking among themselves in low tones. Occasionally someone laughed — nervous laughter that was quickly suppressed.

Dmitri's evenings, Mary Roberts suspected, were not particularly pleasant affairs. . . .

Mary knew these people. One or two were really ill, several were suffering from neuroses, a few were crackpot faddists, but the majority were merely out for a thrill. And all were wealthy.

The man Dmitri, Mary decided as she looked about, must be, even if a charlatan, certainly a personality. . . .

She turned, with a wry smile, to her friend.

"This gathering surely makes me feel like a poor little church-mouse," she admitted ruefully. "Father was never a financial giant, you know, Helen."

Helen Stacey-Forbes smiled reassuringly.

"Money can't buy character and breeding, my dear. I see old Mortimer Dunlop up there in the second row; you are welcome in homes he's never seen and never will see—except from the street. Damned old bucket-shop pirate! Have you heard the rumor that he's full of carcinoma? They're giving him from six to nine months to live. That must be why he's here; someone's told him about Dmitri——"

Mary gasped. "And people believe that Dmitri can cure carcinoma? Why, it's—Charles said only the other day that Dmitri was merely a half-cracked psychiatrist who's had rather spectacular luck with a few rich patients' imaginary ailments. But carcinoma——!"

Gravely Helen Stacey-Forbes shook her head. "Dmitri's far greater than his enemies will admit. They call him a super-psychologist, a faith-healer, and they laugh at him and threaten him, but the fact remains that his methods succeed. He achieves cures, impossible cures, miraculous cures. I know, because he's the only man who can stop Ronny's hemorrhages. At five thousand dollars a treatment."

"Five thousand dollars!"

Helen laughed, a dry, bitter little laugh. "Believe me, Dmitri is a monster, not a man. Mortimer Dunlop will have to pay dearly for his carcinoma cure!"

The words sent an odd little shudder racing along Mary's spine. For, obviously, Helen Stacey-Forbes believed, believed implicitly, that Dmitri could cure—cancer!

Suddenly, then, the room was silent. The door at the upper end of the chamber had opened, a man had entered.

In the abrupt stillness the man, small, self-effacing, bearing in his hands a large lacquered tray, walked to the oaken table and arranged upon it several articles —a half-dollar, a pair of pliers, a penny box of matches, a small-caliber automatic pistol, a ten-ounce drinking-glass, a tinkling pitcher of ice-water, and a battered gasoline blow-torch. A curious, incomprehensible array. . . .

The little man left the room. The babble of nervous voices began again, as suddenly stopped when the door reopened and a monstrosity entered.

The man was huge. At least six feet three inches tall, he was as tremendous horizontally as vertically. A mountain of flesh swathed in a silken lounging-robe, he slowly walked to the table, and settled, grunting, into the big oaken chair. In-

stantly immobile, he surveyed the room through small, coal-black eyes set close together in a pasty-white face. Obscene of body and countenance, his forehead was nevertheless magnificent, but his scalp, even to the sides of his head, was utterly bald. Beneath the table his pillar-like ankles showed whitely above Gargantuan house-slippers.

This—*this*, Mary Roberts knew, was Dmitri. . . .

Leisurely the monster poured a glass of water and took a tentative sip, the glass looking no larger than a jigger in his tremendous, flabby hand. An expression that might have been a smile—or a leer—rippled momentarily across his fat-engulfed features, revealed an instant's glimpse of startlingly white teeth. He began to speak——

"I see a number of new faces before me today," he began in a voice incongruously, almost shockingly vibrant and beautiful; Enrico Caruso's speaking voice, Mary thought suddenly, must have sounded like that—"and for the benefit of those who are not already familiar with my theories I will repeat, briefly, my conception of the function of the Will in the treatment of disease."

He paused, sipped meagerly from his glass of ice-water. Then he went on, his speech only faintly stilted, only faintly revealing him a man to whom English was an acquired language:

"Speaking in the philosophical—not the chemical—sense, it is my belief that there is but one fundamental element—abstract mind. Of course, that which we term matter is, in the last analysis, energy; there is no such thing as matter except as a manifestation of energy. Yet it is quite obvious, or it should be obvious, at any rate, that mind—that attribute which we wrongfully confuse with consciousness—is totally independent of matter. A man dies, but his atomic weight remains unchanged; the strange force which activated him has found its material shell no longer tenable, and has taken its departure.

"We are all well acquainted with the axiomatic law of physics which deals with the conservation of energy. But here we reach a paradox—either energy must have been non-existent at one time, or it must be eternal—contradictory and utterly irreconcilable concepts. The logical and the only conclusion is plain: *energy and matter do not and have never existed*. They are but temporary conceptions of an infinite, timeless Mind, a Mind of which we are part——"

There was a sudden snort from the second row. "Rubbish! What's all this jabber got to do with me? I came here to be cured, not to be preached at!"

The colossus slowly poured a glass of ice-water.

"Sir, you must understand—if you possess sufficient intelligence—that I can do nothing for you without your help." The bulbous lips writhed in a half-smile. "You have been rude, my friend—should I decide to treat your carcinoma I will leave you the poorer man by half your fortune before you are cured. That prospect, at least, you can understand."

Mortimer Dunlop, his seamed face livid with rage, got hastily to his feet and strode to the center door. He jerked the door open, slammed it behind him as he stormed from the room.

Unperturbed, Dmitri continued, "Mind came before matter; mind is the great motivator. Mind can conceive matter; matter cannot conceive anything, even itself.

"It is evident to any person who carefully considers these conclusions that in each one of us exists a spark, part and parcel of that great intangible Will which created all things. But this reasoning invariably leads to a conclusion so tremen-

dous that the human consciousness, except in rare instances, rejects it.

"The conclusion is plain. The unfettered Will, by and of itself, can work miracles, move mountains, create and destroy!

"Listen carefully, for Coué and Pavlov and your own J. B. Watson were closer to the truth than they knew. . . .

"I pick up this coin, and I place it upon my wrist, so. Now I suggest to myself that it is very hot. But my conscious knows that it is not hot, and so I merely appear, to myself and to you all, a trifle foolish.

"Nevertheless, any hypnotist can suggest to a pre-hypnotized subject that the coin is indeed hot, and the subject's flesh will blister if touched with this same cold coin! . . .

"Now I will call my servant——"

PLACING his two enormous, shapeless hands on the table, Dmitri heaved himself to his feet, and a tremendous bellow issued from his barrel-like chest. That summons, though the words were lost in a gulf of sound, was unmistakable, and presently the door opened and the little man, prim and neat and wholly a colorless personality, entered.

"Yes, Master."

Dmitri stood beside the table, his right hand resting heavily on the polished oak.

"Sit down, little Stepan."

The small man, the ghost of a pleased smile on his peasant face, sat down primly in the oaken chair and looked about the room with child-like pleasure. Obviously he was enjoying to the uttermost his small moment.

"You would prefer the sleep, little one? It is not necessary; we have been through this experiment many times together, you and I."

"I would prefer the sleep, Master," the little man said, with a slight shudder. "Despite myself, my eyes flinch from the flame——"

"Very well." Dmitri's voice was casual and low. "Relax, little one, and sleep. Sleep soundly——"

He turned from his servant and picked up the fifty-cent piece. Turning it over and over in the fingers of his left hand he began to speak, slowly.

"I have told this subject's subconscious that its body is invulnerable to physical injury. Watch!"

The little man was sitting erect in the massive chair. His eyes were closed, his face immobile. Dmitri stooped, lifted an arm, let it fall.

"You are not yet sleeping soundly, Stepan. Relax and sleep—sleep——"

Slowly the muscles in the little man's face loosened, slowly his mouth drooped, half open. Small bubbles of mucus appeared at the corners of his lips.

Dmitri seemed satisfied. Quietly, soothingly, he spoke.

"Can you hear me?"

The man's lips moved. "I can hear you."

"Who am I?"

The answer came slowly, without inflection. "You are the Voice that Speaks from Beyond the Darkness."

Dmitri loomed above the chair. "You remember the truths that I have taught you?"

"Master, I remember."

"You believe?"

"Master, I believe. You have told me that you are infallible."

Dmitri straightened triumphantly and surveyed his silent audience. Suddenly, then, a roaring streamer of bluish flame lanced across the room. Dmitri had set the gasoline torch alight.

A woman was babbling hysterically. But above the steady moan of the flame Dmitri said loudly, "There is no cause for alarm. Now, observe closely. I am

going to go far beyond the ordinary hypnotist's procedure——"

He carefully picked up, with the pliers, the fifty-cent piece. For a long moment he let the moaning flame play on the coin, until both coin and plier-tips glowed angrily.

Calmly, without warning, he dropped the burning coin on his servant's naked wrist!

A woman screamed. But, then, gasps of relief eddied from the tense audience. For, although the glowing whiteness of the coin had scarcely begun to fade into cherry-red, the man Stepan had shown no sign that he felt pain! There was no stench of burning flesh in the room. Even the fine hairs on the back of the servant's wrist, hairs that touched and curled delicately above the burning coin, showed not the slightest sign of singeing!

Dmitri's face was an obese smirk.

"In order that you may be convinced that this is neither illusion nor trickery," he grunted, "watch!" Carefully he tapped the coin with the pliers, knocking it from the man's wrist to the floor.

Around the coin's glowing rim smoke began to rise. . . .

Still smirking, Dmitri poured a half-glass of ice-water on the red-hot coin, and the water hissed and fumed as it struck the incandescent metal. There was a little puff of thick smoke from the burning wood, and now the coin was cold —cold and black and seared.

No scar marked the servant's white wrist!

Dmitri rubbed his great, shapeless hands together. And, shuddering, Mary Roberts watched him, for she knew instinctively that this was, indeed, no trickery. . . .

Abruptly Dmitri lifted the roaring torch, thrust its fierce blast full in his servant's face, held it there for a moment that seemed an eternity. Then he turned a valve, and the hot flame died.

Though the man Stepan's face was streaked with carbon soot, the flesh was smooth and unharmed as though the blue flame had never been!

Dmitri looked at his guests, and chuckled!

"One more test," he boomed, then, "and we will turn to more pleasant things. Believe me when I tell you that these horrors are necessary if you would have faith in me." He picked up the small automatic pistol. "Will someone examine this weapon, assure you all that it is fully loaded?"

No one offered to touch the gun. Dmitri shrugged. "Do not doubt me; the weapon is loaded, and with lethal ammunition." He wheeled, and for an instant the gun hammered rapidly, and on the breast of his servant's shirt, over the heart, there appeared suddenly a little cluster of black-edged holes, beneath which the white flesh gleamed unmarked. . . .

Dmitri put down the gun and rubbed his hands together affably.

"Should anyone care to examine the back of that chair, he will find all the bullets I have just fired, together with a great many others fired in previous experiments." He stooped over his still, pallid-faced servant. "You may awaken now, little one." Then, to the horror-ridden group before him, "There will be refreshments and music immediately, downstairs. I will mingle among you, and you may ask me any questions you wish."

Stepan, the slight, wholly undistinguished-appearing servant, had risen from the chair and was holding wide the door. Slowly, regally, his master walked from the room. . . .

3. The Hypnotic Lamp

"YOU really must meet him, Mary. He's—he's such an overwhelming personality, and it would be rude, really, to avoid him now. See, he's looking toward us——"

Casually Mary Roberts turned her head. Across the long expanse of this almost flamboyantly oriental downstairs room in which Dmitri's guests had assembled she saw the man. He was seated in a massive, ivory-armed, dragon-footed chair, and he was talking to a group of three or four women. But he was looking beyond them, speculatively, at Mary.

"Helen, I'm afraid of him. He's—he's evil—blasphemous!"

Helen Stacey-Forbes only laughed. "Blasphemous?" she echoed. "Nonsense! He's only years ahead of his time. Never fear—his interest in you will vanish as soon as he learns that you can't pay his outrageous fees." She was already—Mary's arm linked in her own—threading her way through the chatting throng. . . .

The colossus, as they approached, abruptly cut short his conversation with the group of admiring ladies and turned his flabby bulk toward them.

"They are thrill-seekers, Miss Stacey-Forbes," he exclaimed petulantly. "Still—I have made appointments with two of them. . . . But how is your brother, Ronald? And who is your friend?"

"Dmitri—Mary Roberts," Helen Stacey-Forbes said formally. "Miss Roberts is the daughter of the Honorable James Roberts. . . . Ronald is well; he is very careful not to endanger himself."

Dmitri chuckled. "Ronald is being very careful, eh? Well, well—but accidents sometimes happen—and then there is only Dimitri." He stared fixedly at Mary. "You are very beautiful, my child; our Police Commissioner Ethredge is a fortunate man—indeed he is."

Mary Roberts flushed. "I was impressed by your — demonstration," she said hastily. "It was—spectacular."

He lifted a monstrous, shapeless paw.

"Histrionics," he said flatly. "My real work does not deal with such fireworks. Would you be convinced? Are you in every respect sound and well?"

Mary tried to repress the shudder of aversion that crept through her as she looked at the man.

"I am in perfect health," she said firmly.

Dmitri looked down at his great soft hands. Then he spoke, as it were casually, to Helen Stacey-Forbes.

"I have wanted—since your brother came to me a year ago—to examine you, as well. You come from an old family; should you marry it is possible that you would transmit to your children the hemophilia from which he suffers. Today is a propitious day; your friend can accompany us while I interrogate you; then, should she need me at some future time she would not fear me — as she does now."

Helen Stacey-Forbes' face was grave. "I had thought—of coming to you," she admitted. "Perhaps—if Miss Roberts is willing——?"

Mary objected only faintly. She was wondering if perhaps Helen had not really brought her here because she feared to be alone with this man. . . .

"The—guests?"

Dmitri glanced about the room, heaved himself ponderously to his feet.

"The guests!" he exclaimed. "We will be but a few minutes. Those in need of me will wait; the others are better gone. Come."

THE chamber into which Dmitri ushered the two young women was a small room, almost monastically furnished. There was a large table and

Dmitri's usual massive chair; several other, smaller chairs were scattered haphazardly about. A faded strip of carpeting ran diagonally from the door toward the table. There were no pictures, no bookcases or books, no filing-cabinet or desk. A telephone rested at one end of the table, close beside an ambiguity that—save for its grotesquely large bulb, full of an uncommon multiplicity of filaments and several oddly shaped and curiously perforated metal vanes—looked like an unshaded desk-lamp.

Dmitri lowered himself into his tremendous chair. "Sit down," he directed abruptly. "Compose yourselves. You, Miss Roberts, may watch this experiment; it is in no way new, yet it is always fascinating. Notice this lamp; it is so designed that it emits whorls of multicolored light, which move according to a recurrent pattern, somewhat in the manner of a pinwheel."

His hands, hidden beneath the table, touched a concealed switch, and the odd-looking lamp began to glow in all its many filaments, while simultaneously the complexity of tiny vanes began to revolve, slowly at first and then faster and faster, until they had attained a maximum velocity beyond which there was no further acceleration. And as the filaments within the lamp gradually warmed, Mary realized that they gave off light of many colors, as varied and as beautiful as the spectrum seen in rainbows, colors which moved and changed in a weirdly hypnotic sequence of patterns. . . .

"Observe the lamp, Miss Stacey-Forbes," Dmitri said, in a calm, conversational tone. "Do not trouble to think—merely observe the lamp—see how the colors melt and run together and repeat themselves again——"

Abruptly the ceiling light was extinguished. And Mary Roberts gasped at the unearthly beauty of the whirling lights; even beneath the cold glow of the Mazda lamp they had been a strange symphony, but now, glowing and whirling like a mighty nebula of spinning suns——! Her eyes were riveted upon them; they seemed to draw her toward them, to suck her into themselves. . . .

"Observe the lights, Miss Stacey-Forbes——" Mary knew that it was Dmitri's voice, yet it sounded billions of miles away. And, curiously, she believed for a fleeting instant that there was a new note in that slumbrous whisper—a hint of exultation. But the thought vanished in its second of birth, lost amid the maze of spinning lights—the lights that were too, too beautiful. . . .

4. *The Stolen Jewels*

MRS. GREGORY LUCE stood surveying herself with pardonable satisfaction in the almost-complete circle of full-length, chromium-framed mirrors that glittered their utilitarian splendor in a corner of her bedroom. It was well, she was reflecting, that the electric-blue gown fitted her with wrinkleless perfection, that her hair was a miracle even François had seldom achieved; today was her tenth wedding anniversary, and tonight Gregory was taking her to hear *Tristan and Isolde.*

With sophisticated grace she returned to her dressing-table and seated herself. In her walk, languid and self-appreciative though it had been, there was nevertheless a vague essence reminiscent of Mary Roberts; Priscilla Luce might almost have been a prophetic vision of Mary as she would some day be—their mothers were sisters. Only Priscilla was a little more the cautious type than was Mary: Priscilla had selected her husband with an eye to the future; she did not wholly approve of Charles Ethredge. Otherwise the two young women were very much alike. . . .

Slowly, then, Priscilla Luce smiled. Surprizingly, her marriage had turned out an emotional as well as a financial success; she was truly grateful to and in love with Gregory, now. There had been an unsuspected tinge of romanticism in him, after all; on their wedding day he had given her his grandmother's emerald brooch, set with its great, flawless, square-cut stone—and the ruby and emerald tiara. And today he had brought her a Cartier bracelet, also of cool green emeralds. . . .

Languidly she arose and walked to the south wall. Here, between the two windows, hung a single, exquisite little etching. Priscilla Luce reached up, swung the etching back on cleverly concealed hinges, twirled the combination of the blued-steel wall-safe. . . .

In the moment that she reached inside the tiny safe Priscilla Luce knew that someone other than herself had handled the little leather-bound jewel-cases within.

For a moment she stood stock-still. Then, carefully, she began to remove the jewel-cases, opening and examining each one.

When she had finished she walked to the dressing-table and sat down. She knew that she would not tell Gregory tonight; she would wear the Cartier bracelet, and he would not know; his evening would not be spoiled. But she would have to tell him, tomorrow, and they would have to decide what to do. . . .

The emerald brooch and the priceless old tiara were gone!

And very clearly Priscilla Luce realized that the thief was someone they knew —someone they trusted. . . .

She stared at herself in the mirror. She was beginning to feel frightened, beginning to feel a sick, anticipatory dread. . . .

5. *Ethredge Hears Startling News*

When Police Commissioner Charles B. Ethredge received Priscilla Luce's enigmatic and disturbingly urgent telephone call he lost no time in getting to the Vermont marble and Bethlehem steel palace the Luce millions had built, ten years before, for Gregory Luce's young bride. "It concerns Mary, terribly," his fiancée's cousin had said, her voice taut and strange, "but do not, under any circumstances, tell her that I have called you."

Priscilla Luce met him in the library. She greeted him with grave gratitude; as soon as they were seated she began almost bruskly to speak.

"I called you, Charles, because you are both influential and discreet, and because you are vitally concerned in what I have to say. Charles, do you know anything of a psychiatrist who came to town about fourteen months ago—a man who calls himself Dmitri?"

Ethredge nodded.

"Why, yes, I have heard of him; Mary attended one of his Thursday evenings a week or two ago with Helen Stacey-Forbes. Helen is enthusiastic about what he seems to have done for Ronald."

Priscilla Luce smiled thinly. "It seems strange that Ronald was never ill until *after* he met this Dmitri. Do you know anything more about the man?"

"Yes," Ethredge grunted, "I do. Dmitri is a sensationalist. The more conservative psychiatrists have tried to convict him of extortion, of making Messianic and unfulfillable promises, of other unethical and even criminal practises. As he is still practising, their attempts, needless to say, have all failed."

Priscilla Luce nodded.

"What did Mary say about him?"

Ethredge grinned.

"Very little. Said that she was amused

—that perhaps, beneath all his stage trappings, the man might even be competent. That's all."

Nervously Priscilla Luce leaned forward.

"Charles, obviously you don't know that Mary has been after me these past two weeks to go to Dmitri's with her. She hasn't asked me merely a few times; she's asked me incessantly. I've always refused—Gregory, as you know, would disapprove—and since last Friday she hasn't asked me once. But last Thursday evening she went again to Dmitri's. Did you know?"

Ethredge's mouth was grim. "I didn't, no."

Priscilla Luce leaned forward and put her hands pleadingly on Charles Ethredge's lean strong wrists.

"This is going to be hard, terribly hard, to tell you. And please, Charles, please understand that I have not come to you because you are Mary's fiancé; I am not as despicable as that. I have come to you because you are the Commissioner of Police, because, if anyone can, you can help her——"

"In God's name," Ethredge whispered, "what is wrong? Tell me——"

The woman's face was drawn with misery.

"Between Thursday last and last night Grandma Luce's brooch and tiara were stolen from my wall-safe. Only two persons know the combination to that safe, and of those two persons Gregory is automatically absolved——"

"You suspect—Mary!" It was not a question; it was a statement—flat, lifeless. And in Ethredge's heart was a slow-growing horror, for this thing Mary could never have done; yet he knew, knew already that her hands had taken the jewels. . . .

"Yes. Gregory has had private detectives—from Philadelphia. Mary's fingerprints——"

There was silence in that room, then, while Ethredge stared at Priscilla Luce's slender, patrician hands, still clasping his wrists.

"It was not in Mary to do this thing," he said at last, quietly. "There must be some other explanation, however incredible. Mary could never steal."

The small hands touching his wrists trembled.

"Perhaps I was wrong about you, and Mary," Priscilla Luce said softly. "I was arrogant—and ambitious for her. I am sorry."

Suddenly her eyes welled with tears, the great drops falling like glistening diamonds on Ethredge's hands. . . .

6. *Ethredge Asks Help*

"PETERS, come to my apartment; I've got to talk to you."

Detective-Lieutenant Peters of the homicide squad, sitting with his square-toed boots outsplayed on the scarred top of his Detective-Bureau desk, listened, his face expressionless as stone, to the taut, nerve-racked voice of his chief. Calmly he spoke.

"O. K., Commissioner; I'll be right out." Carefully, leaning forward from his hips, he set the telephone down. For an instant he did not move; then he swung his feet to the floor and stood erect. His face, as he crossed the room toward the coat-rack, was still blankly impassive.

Yet within his skull his thoughts were seething. Through an instinct born of long association and mutual trust he knew that the Commissioner had at last decided to confide in him; between the Commissioner and his subordinate there existed a peculiar—and by most persons unsuspected—friendship. . . .

The distance to Ethredge's home was not great, and Peters, driving a police sedan, covered it quickly. The Commissioner, when he rang, let him in at once.

Definitely, Peters saw at once, Ethredge looked ill. But Peters knew, too, that something far less easily defined than mere illness had kept the Commissioner away from his desk these past few days. . . .

"Drink?" Ethredge gestured toward a nest of bottles and an array of glasses conveniently at hand.

"Thanks." Peters helped himself to two ounces of whisky, downed it neat. The men sat down.

"Peters," Ethredge began abruptly, "I'm up against something that I can't fight alone. And I can't use the police, because I've no case that would convince a jury; I'd be thought mad. Also, Mary is involved, and her connection with this affair must never become public knowledge."

Peters nodded. "Better tell me everything, Commissioner."

"Peters, can a hypnotist cure disease in another man through subconscious suggestion? Can an adept so control his subject's mind that that subject becomes his virtual slave, even to the extent of committing a theft? Can a hypnotist cause his subject to suffer and die from a disease which heretofore has not threatened him?"

Peters looked thoughtfully at the nest of bottles.

"Sounds like Dmitri."

"Yes," Ethredge exclaimed hoarsely, "it *is* Dmitri, damn him!"

Leisurely the Detective-Lieutenant rose, poured a half-drink of amber-colored whisky, sat down again.

"Commissioner, hypnosis, the powers of the will, the depths of the subconscious, are to a great extent unknowns—and limitless unknowns. I cannot say that I would definitely disbelieve anything, anything at all, you might tell me concerning them. Dmitri? Certainly I believe the stories I've heard about Dmitri. Tales of men dying of loathsome diseases after willing him their money—tales of strange thefts and inexplicable gifts of which he seems invariably the beneficiary."

Ethredge leaned forward.

"Yet we can do nothing—legally."

Peters shook his head. "No, nothing—legally."

Ethredge spread out his hands and looked helplessly at them.

"Peters, I went to see the man. He has Mary under his control; I've been watching her, following her about for days. She doesn't know, and I'm tired, tired almost to death; I've had to do it all myself; I dared trust no one. Peters, a week ago Mary took her cousin Priscilla Luce's jewels, and brought them to Dmitri; God knows what he's done with them. Since then she's been trying to persuade Mrs. Leeds—Arthur Leeds' widow—to go to Dmitri's with her. God, I *know* that the man's a monster, yet I'm helpless against him."

Ethredge paused, and slowly his hands knotted into fists, relaxed.

"Peters, when I went to see him he laughed at me. More, he said that so long as Mary had access to wealthy homes he would continue to use her, and that if I so much as attempted to interfere with him he would make her suffer, horribly. She was my vulnerability, he told me, and she was his chattel."

Peters lifted his drink to his lips.

"A venomous fellow," he said softly, "and a strategist, as well."

"Yes," Ethredge muttered. "I'm afraid that he can do everything he says."

Peters set down the small glass, empty.

"You are right. Undoubtedly he can do everything he says. And yet we are

men, and when men meet a poisonous serpent they squash it, and we must squash Dmitri as pitilessly." He paused, then slowly continued, "There might even be a certain poetic justice in the method by which this may most safely be done. Yes, I think so. I think that on Thursday evening you and I will be included among Dmitri's guests, and then we shall see what we shall see."

7. *The Spider's Lair*

CHARLES ETHREDGE sat, alone, in Dmitri's small, first-floor consulting-room. He sat poised tensely on the very edge of his hard, uncomfortable chair. As the minutes slowly passed his fingers drummed, now and again, with a nervous, jerky rhythm on the top of Dmitri's massive table. Occasionally he glanced swiftly about the barren room, but there was little to attract his attention within that tiny chamber; even the cryptic lamp in the center of the table was dark and lifeless. And Ethredge was not really concerned with the room in which he sat; his whole attention was focussed on the room adjoining, the theatrically oriental reception chamber from which came, faintly, the sensuous sobbing of Dmitri's balalaika orchestra and the muffled murmuring of departing guests.

One by one the voices dwindled, and at last even the music of the orchestra ceased. There was the sound of brief confusion as the musicians packed their instruments and took their departure, and then utter silence.

The door opened, and Dmitri, wearing his invariable lounging-robe and slippers, entered. With slow, waddling shuffle he crossed behind the table to his personal chair, and carefully eased his flabby bulk into its capacious depths.

"Very well, Commissioner Ethredge; we are alone together, as you requested. My guests have gone; my orchestra is already drinking vodka within some wine-shop; only my servant remains within the house. You see that I am not afraid of you."

Abruptly he paused. For the door behind Ethredge's shoulder had opened, and a man had stepped swiftly into the room, closing the door behind him.

Dmitri's cruel black eyes were suddenly wary.

"Who are you? I recognize you; you were among those at my demonstration, but—you disappeared. What are you doing here?"

Peters grinned reassuringly at the Commissioner, spoke almost soothingly to Dmitri. "There is a narrow space between your orchestra dais and the wall, uncomfortable, yet a sufficient hiding-place. Who am I? He shrugged slightly. "I am—of the police. Afraid that you might not agree to grant us a joint audience, I took the precaution of concealing myself."

For a moment Dmitri sat still. Then his fat shoulders heaved in a billowing shrug, and he spoke almost scornfully.

"One or two or a dozen of your kind; what does it matter? With your *mujik* here to lend you courage, Commissioner, what do you propose now?"

The words were goading, taunting, and swiftly Peters signed to Ethredge to remain silent. Almost gently he murmured, "What do we propose now? Well, Dmitri, we propose first that you release Mary Roberts from whatever enjoinments you have placed upon her subconscious."

He paused, for the obese colossus was smiling.

"Suppose that I refuse."

Peters literally purred his reply, "You are an intelligent man; I assure you that the police of this country have devised extremely piquant methods of making a

man suffer, methods which we would not hesitate to employ upon you."

For an instant the pupils of Dmitri's eyes dilated. Then, his voice blandly impassive, he said, "You forget that, even if I would, I could not, in her absence, release Mary Roberts' subconscious. I am not a story-book magician, and I cannot command her conscious to come here. She will not come here again, except of her own free will, unless she brings—another with her. And that will be only on a Thursday. She did not come tonight; would you wait here seven days for her to present herself?"

Slowly Peters smiled. "Mary Roberts, at Commissioner Ethredge's request, is waiting in a small restaurant not far from here. I will telephone her." He rose, took a step toward the table.

The colossus seemed to swell in his chair like an infuriated toad. "Stop!" His chest heaved, and from his cavernous interior there issued a half-shriek, half-bellow that beat in that small room like the scream of an ape. "Stepan! *Stepan!*"

Peters' hand flicked to his hip. But Dmitri only smiled, smiled and shook his monstrous head.

"Your weapon will be of no avail against my Stepan."

8. *Stepan*

ABRUPTLY the door opened, and the small, wholly self-effacing Stepan entered, glanced imperturbably about. He carried Dmitri's small automatic pistol in his right hand, and instinctively Peters' fingers moved, again, toward his hip, then paused helplessly as his mind recalled with sudden sharp vividness the incredible demonstration he had witnessed only a brief hour before. Too well he knew that his gun was, indeed, powerless to harm Stepan. . . .

Dmitri was grinning broadly.

"Watch these men closely, Stepan, and usher them from my house. Should they attempt any tricks do not hesitate to shoot. After all, they are here against my will, and they have threatened me."

The servant Stepan, only a slight tinge of color in his cheeks revealing that he felt any interest whatever in the proceedings, gestured with the small automatic. And in that instant Peters whipped to the floor, his hands grasped the end of the strip of carpet on which Stepan stood, his body jerked backward.

His arms wildly flailing, Stepan plunged to his hands and knees; the automatic skittered across the floor. And suddenly Dmitri, half lifting himself from his chair, was babbling unintelligible, fear-ridden words. Ethredge, as Peters rose to his feet, had pounced upon the outsplayed servant, pinioning him to the floor; Peters, his right hand at his hip, swung alertly toward Dmitri.

"I've — got him, Peters," Ethredge gasped, the little man beneath him no match for the Commissioner's sinewy strength. And chill, shuddery horror abruptly swept him as he realized that this man he touched, this squirming, writhing thing beneath his hands, was invulnerable to lead or to flame, a being that could be overpowered, but that could not be destroyed! *"What'll I do with him?"*

Grimly Peters snarled, "Hold on to him. I'll handle this death-ridden diabetic!"

His service automatic a blue-steel menace in his right hand, Peters walked to the table. With his left hand he lifted the receiver from the telephone and dialed a number. Warily he stooped over the table as he spoke, presently, with Mary Roberts. Then he cradled the receiver and sat down, facing the colossus.

"She will come here, at once."

Seemingly, Dmitri had collapsed. His shapeless hands lay limply on the chair

arms, his great chest heaved gulpingly; only the snaky brightness in his darting ebon eyes warned Peters that his tremendous brain was thinking, planning, calculating with chain-lightning rapidity. The servant Stepan was only spasmodically struggling.

Peters spoke abruptly to Ethredge.

"When Mary comes someone will have to admit her. Can you keep this devil covered while I go to the door?"

Ethredge, crouching across the servant's chest, his knees crushing the man's shoulders against the floor, nodded. . . .

Silence, rolling on with interminable slowness, gripped the room. Gradually the rattle of Dmitri's breathing was growing quiet; he sat now in his chair like some obscene, waiting idol, his face an undecipherable mask.

From beyond the tight-closed door a bell faintly tinkled. Peters edged toward Ethredge, slipped his automatic into the Commissioner's outstretched hand. Then he was gone. . . .

Dmitri did not move. A minute passed; to Ethredge it seemed as though all the suspense of myriad ages was bound up in that brief span. Then the door re-opened and Peters, followed by Mary Roberts, re-entered the room. Mary's fair, oval face was a composite of bewilderment and apprehension; in the instant that she glimpsed the tableau within the room her slender body trembled violently and the color drained from her face, leaving it white as new paper. But then her straight, strong young spine stiffened and her firm little jaw set hard. Pale though she was, she glanced inquiringly at Ethredge.

"Charles——" she whispered.

Shakily, Ethredge smiled. He nodded toward Dmitri, bloated, swollen, huddled inscrutably in his chair.

"I'll have to tell you—now, Mary," he said slowly. "Try to understand. On the night that you came here with Helen Stacey-Forbes, Dmitri ensnared you. He cast a—spell over you. We have come here, we have asked you to come here—we are going to force him to release you."

Mary, staring at her sweetheart, was frowning. Almost musingly she spoke.

"I have had—terrible dreams," she said, her voice low, "dreams in which he told me to do—strange things; dreams in which I—obeyed him. But I believed that they were only nightmares. And yet, though I loathed him, I know that I have surrendered to the strangest impulse to ask others to come here with me—Mrs. Arthur Leeds——"

Ethredge's eyes, as he glanced at Dmitri, were suddenly cruel. Then, gently, he spoke again to Mary.

"We must free you now, free you from Dmitri—for ever. But Peters believes that you will have to go, once more, beneath his spell."

For a long moment Mary stood there quiet. Then, the words barely audible, she breathed, "Very well, Charles. I am ready."

Peters, who until this moment had been standing, hands in his jacket pockets, with his back against the door, advanced into the room, stooped for the automatic in Ethredge's outstretched hand, and dropped into one of the row of chairs that faced Dmitri's huge table.

"Very well, Dmitri," he said, gesturing significantly with the automatic, "let us waste no more time. Proceed, and understand clearly, that if you attempt to trick me I will certainly kill you."

Briefly the men's eyes met and clashed. Then, with surprizing suddenness, Dmitri rolled his flaccid shoulders in an expressive, acquiescent shrug; his loose lips split in a good-humored leer.

"Shall I confess that I am beaten, then?" he asked affably. "Yes, let it be so; I begin to believe that I have, in any

case, overestimated Mary Roberts' value to me. If you will sit across from me, Miss Roberts, and look fixedly at the lamp——"

Warningly Peters exclaimed, "Don't look directly at that thing, Commissioner!"

Did a flicker of disappointment cross Dmitri's face? Peters, as he moved from his chair to stand directly behind Dmitri, the muzzle of the automatic inches from Dmitri's silk-swathed shoulders, never knew. . . .

9. *The Spider Spins*

DMITRI's fat fingers touched a small button set beneath the edge of the table. And instantly, though Peters forced himself not to look up, he felt, beating against his lowered eyelids, the incredibly soothing, incredibly beautiful monotony of whirling color produced by the fantastic lamp. Abruptly, then, the ceiling light went out. Except for the diabolically cadenced, leaping reiteration of pinwheel color dancing in the center of the table like some chromatic dervish, the room was dark. Grimly Peters kept his eyes averted, kept his gaze boring into Dmitri's black, pillar-like silhouette.

Slow seconds passed. Then Dmitri spoke, spoke in that vibrant, beautiful voice of his that was like the chanting of a cathedral organ.

"You are asleep, Mary Roberts?"

There was a moment's pause. Warningly the police automatic in Peters' hand touched the sodden flesh at the base of Dmitri's neck.

Through the stillness came Mary's reply: "Master, I am asleep."

By not so much as a single, involuntary shudder had Dmitri betrayed even the slightest awareness of the cold gun-muzzle. Yet Peters knew that even now the man was planning, calculating chance against chance. . . .

"Who am I?" The words boomed like great mellow bass notes.

Mary's answer came unhesitatingly: "You are the Voice that Speaks from Beyond the Darkness. You are the Infallible One."

Peculiarly, Peters sensed that in that instant Dmitri had reached a decision. . . .

The strong, resonant phrases rolled on, "You will forget the assignment that I have given you." There was a pause, and Peters realized with a curious, crawling anticipation that Dmitri was gathering himself together, concentrating himself upon himself, ominously.

Then the black words boomed, "Let your nerves go mad and your muscles tense and writhe until death releases you!"

"Damn you!" Peters snarled the curse; his gun-muzzle sloughed savagely into Dmitri's obese flesh. Yet the gun did not speak, and Dmitri, wincing beneath the torturing steel, chuckled. . . .

"I gambled that you would not fire," he gasped, his voice suddenly gloating. "And now we are no longer stalemated; before I will consent to release Mary Roberts from the agony she endures you will promise me immunity, and more than immunity—you will promise me protection, henceforth. Take that cannon from my neck——"

The ceiling light flashed up, the whirling of the multicolored vanes slowed and died. And, as the eyes of Ethredge and Peters grew accustomed to the increased illumination within the room, the two men felt their bloodflow pause, then run like ice-water in their veins.

For Mary Roberts had toppled from her chair, and now lay weirdly, unnaturally sprawled on the naked floor beside Dmitri's table, her spine bent backward like a tight-drawn bow, the slender heels

of her tiny shoes nearly touching her chestnut hair beneath her chic little hat, her throat and jaw muscles stretched like oversharp violin strings, her teeth and pink gums bared in a ghastly grin. Her breasts were rising and falling spasmodically; she breathed in choking, rattling gasps. The fair, pale flesh of her oval face was purpling.

"God!" Ethredge stumbled to his feet, stood swaying drunkenly, his hands outstretched; he had utterly forgotten the servant Stepan. For an instant the little man struggled to rise, then sank back weakly.

The obscene colossus grinned. "Do not fear; she will live a long time. Her nerves will tire; then she will relax for a moment. She will breathe more easily, then."

And, as though the prophecy were a command, Mary's body went suddenly, horribly limp, melted against the barren floor as though death had abruptly collapsed every straining muscle. Only her gulping, hurried breathing and the gradual fading of the terrible purple congestion from her face told that she was still alive. Mucus was beginning to run from her loosely open mouth.

Ethredge took a slow, uncertain step forward. "God!" he mumbled, again. Then he found words, babbling, pleading words. "You—devil! Free her, only free her, and——"

"Commissioner!" It was Peters' voice, harsh, rasping. "Commissioner——" With a sudden, gasping sob he paused, for, with the sharply reiterated exclamation Mary's body had once more tensed, knotted into a backward-bent bow more terrible to look upon than had she twisted and writhed.

"Dear God!" Ethredge moaned. He took a second, wavering step forward. And then Peters found speech.

"Commissioner!" His voice was implacable, steely. "Stop! Do you know what you are doing, in surrendering to this—beast of hell? You are dishonoring yourself for ever, you are promising him immunity to torture, and murder, and debase—yes, for he has done all of these things——"

Ethredge's lips were a twisted snarl. "Peters, I would promise him my soul—to free Mary!"

Dmitri was grinning, grinning. . . .

Peters' words were like the flicking of a rapier. "Mary would loathe you—if she knew. Mary would never permit this—sacrifice of honor."

Ethredge took another step forward. He seemed not to have heard.

10. A Little White Pellet

With sudden, grim determination Peters plunged his left hand deep in his breast pocket. His right hand dropped the gun to the floor, his right arm constricted about Dmitri's throat. There was a small white pellet in the fingers of his left hand.

"Dmitri!" he snarled, "this tablet; can you guess what it is?—it smells of almonds!"

The powerful biceps of his right arm tightened. Caught in that strangling embrace, Dmitri writhed weakly, horribly, his pig-like eyes wildly staring.

Peters' face was inches above Dmitri's fear-maddened eyes. The pellet moved closer to Dmitri's slavering, gasping jaws.

"Just a touch against the tip of the tongue! You attempted trickery, Dmitri; had you not done that we might have drawn your fangs and let you live. But now——"

Swiftly, then, he forced the bitter-smelling pellet into Dmitri's wide-distended mouth, crushed the man's jaws violently together.

The taste of almond was strong on Dmitri's tongue.

For a split second his eyes seemed bursting from their sockets. A horrible, retching moan welled from his saliva-drenched mouth; blue veins leaped on his hairless temples. Then, like a pin-pricked balloon, he collapsed; his massive head rolled forward upon his flaccid chest; he huddled there, stilly, in his chair. . . .

"The end of you, Dmitri," Peters was whispering. "The end of you!"

And then he heard Ethredge's voice, dazed with the horror he had undergone, yet implacable, now, with heartbroken resolve.

"We must kill him, Peters! You are right; Mary would not have us sell honor, even to save her!"

Ethredge, his eyes unseeing, his mind near-crazed by suffering, did not know that Dmitri was already dead. And yet——

"Dmitri is dead," Peters said softly. His whole attention was focussed upon Mary, upon the small huddled figure that, in the instant of Dmitri's passing, had suddenly relaxed, lay now in semi-conscious exhaustion. And in Peters' heart there leaped exultation; for in his mind had been, all along, the strange, weird conviction that the end of Dmitri would bring release to those he had enslaved. For Peters knew that Dmitri had instilled into the subconscious of his victims the belief that he was infallible, the belief that he was a kind of god, protecting them, shielding them, curing them of their ills. But now the man-god was dead, and, of necessity, in each of his dupes the blind, limitless sea of the subconscious was rejecting the theories he had taught, spewing out his broken image, obliterating him, in disillusionment, from the chasms of memory. Before Peters' eyes the unnatural tendency to convulsion that Dmitri had instilled in Mary Roberts' subconscious, the cruel weapon he had implanted within the core of her being and goaded, in terror-ridden desperation, into life, had died in the instant her subconscious became aware of Dmitri's passing, had ceased as abruptly as though a circuit had been broken, as completely as though an evil light had been extinguished. . . .

Peters, stooping over Mary, now limply, weakly relaxed, slipped his strong right arm beneath her shoulders, murmured swift, soothing words. Sanity, he saw, was flooding back into her eyes. And then she looked toward and beyond Ethredge, and she screamed—and screamed again.

Peters' eyes followed her rigid gaze, and as he looked at the servant Stepan his nerves crawled and the short hairs at the base of his neck bristled in an ecstasy of horror.

"Dear—God!"

In that second of unsurpassable horror there blazed across Peters' mind a strange kaleidoscope of tableaux, tableaux that were all the same, tableaux of the obese Dmitri and the small, self-effacing Stepan enacting a multitude of Dmitri's experiments, experiments in which invariably the small automatic hammered bullets into Stepan's chest, the blow-torch flamed in Stepan's face, hot coins were dropped with seeming harmlessness on Stepan's wrists! That horror on the floor, that horror that had been the servant Stepan, that horror that had, in the moment of Dmitri's passing, *changed!*

"Dear—God!"

For the flesh-and-blood face of the servant Stepan had vanished, and in its place there remained only nightmare, only a flame-charred, crimson skull! The horror lay upon its back, its arms outflung, as it had lain while Ethredge pinioned it down. Its jacket was open, and the

exposed expanse of shirt-front was a sticky crimson smear.

"Dear—God!"

Those bullets, those hundreds of bullets, that Dmitri must have fired, during the months and years, through Stepan's chest! And somehow Peters knew, as he gazed through mercifully glazed eyes upon the horror outsplayed there, that beneath the red-drenched shirt there remained no shred of mortal flesh, but only a bleeding, bullet-blasted hole!

And on Stepan's wrists Peters saw the holes, the great fire-seared holes, the charred, circular holes the size of a half-dollar. . . .

"Dear—God!" Peters was babbling, over and over, inanely.

DIMLY, while his brain reeled and his soul retched as he gazed upon the ghastly thing on the floor, he yet realized that the same release that had, in the instant of Dmitri's passing, loosed Mary Roberts' nerves and muscles from the death-laden throes of convulsion, had also, and in that same awful instant, freed Stepan's subconscious from the enjoinment that his body was invulnerable to physical injury. And with that release had come Stepan's doom—the long-delayed death that should have been his in the instant, now perhaps years in the past, that Dmitri had first blasted a bullet through his heart.

In that moment Peters was hardly a man—he was more an animal, terrified, near mad with horror. He realized only vaguely that his hands were clenched into rigid fists, that his heart was pounding with frantic rapidity. He could feel his spine crawl and bristle; sweat, reeking with adrenal secretions, leaped from his pores.

But warningly, through waves of horror, some tiny figment of his brain was reiterating the command, "Don't let go of yourself! Don't let your nerve break!"

Slowly, then, he tore his gaze away from that horror on the floor. And, gradually, his vision cleared, his brain resumed its functioning. He had been close to madness. . . .

He saw Ethredge, then, standing close beside the table, gazing at the horror at his feet, swaying, tottering drunkenly. Just as the Commissioner would have reeled to the floor Peters stumbled to his feet, grasped the man, guided him like a shambling cretin to a chair, fumbled in the Commissioner's hip pocket for his whisky-flask.

"Dear Lord!" Peters whispered, as he forced whisky into Ethredge's trembling mouth. "Dear Lord! if this doesn't drive him—drive her—mad——"

That horror—that horror on the floor!

But the hot, burning stimulant was bringing color back into Ethredge's face. Swiftly Peters turned to Mary, tilted her head back, poured a staggering draft down her throat. Gently he lifted her up, supported her to a chair, where she sat dazedly. Mercifully, she was in almost a comatose condition.

Ethredge was beginning to find words. "That thing—that—thing!" he was mumbling.

Incisively, then, Peters spoke.

"Commissioner, you've got to get hold of yourself. We must get the medical examiner here, get Hanlon and Delaney and men from the Medical Association; we must hush this affair up. Thank God we have influence; thank God the horrors Dmitri has perpetrated on this man have been witnessed by many persons. Perhaps the story will be—a private experiment that failed, and Dmitri dead—of heart-failure. Dmitri was, after all, diabetic, and his heart was untrustworthy. But—we cannot wait; we must call Hanlon at once." He moved toward the telephone.

"But Dmitri!" Ethredge whispered. "Dmitri — dead of cyanide poisoning! The medical examiner will know. Dmitri —murdered!"

Peters turned. His face, as he slowly shook his head, was enigmatic.

"No, Commissioner. Remember that I once told you that there might even be a certain poetic justice in the manner by which Dmitri might be most safely—destroyed? That pellet was harmless, made of crushed almonds and flour; Dmitri was his own executioner. He believed that he was tasting cyanide, and so he died; his own weapon, the power of suggestion, killed him—justly."

He was lifting the telephone to his ear. But before he dialed the well-remembered number he looked, thoughtfully, for a long moment, at Dmitri, at the bloated, repulsively hairless hulk that had once housed a brilliant, utterly evil soul.

"Poor, warped devil!" he softly mused; "he could treat and cure others by suggestion, but he could not treat himself. And now he is dead. Well——"

The short, stubby fingers of his right hand were dialing the number. And, as he listened to the small, reiterated grating sound of the whirling dial, he realized, vaguely, that Ethredge had gone to Mary Roberts, that Ethredge was stooping over her comfortingly, soothing her within his strong, embracing arms.

Dreadful Sleep

By JACK WILLIAMSON

A thrilling tale, a romantic and tragic tale, a weird-scientific story of the awakening of the fearsome beings that lay in dreadful slumber under the antarctic ice, and the weird doom that befell the world

AN INITIAL apology seems due the reader of this history. For I, Ronald Dunbar, am not a man of letters. Three of the books that bear my name—those entitled *Antarcticana I, II,* and *III*—are merely the necessary scientific records of my various polar explorations. And the popular abridgment of them called *An Odyssey of the Ice* was no more than an effort (which turned out very happily) to wipe out the deficit of my third expedition.

It happens however, that no accomplished literary historian was present to observe those mind-crushing events that made the year 1960 the most terrible in human history. I am the only surviving witness to much of that hideously enigmatic catastrophe. Despite my disqualifications, therefore, as well as the natural reluctance of an active man to spending some months confined to on unaccustomed desk, I feel it my duty to set down a plain, simple account of what happened. If without much literary embellishment, it will at least be accurate and clear.

The event of June 11-December 24, 1960, is already recognized to be the most astounding and terrifying phenomenon that ever overtook our world. It was high noon over America, on June 11, when the

"The shining siren fled away before him, mocking, elusive."

summer sun abruptly vanished and the chill blackness of a wintry midnight fell, soundless but infinitely apalling. At the same instant, in the eastern hemisphere, night was turned incredibly into day.

Amid the stunned shock and panic that followed, astronomers swiftly perceived that the earth had moved half around its orbit. In a split heartbeat, six months had somehow gone. The Christmas season fell, unwarned, upon a world too staggered and fearful for merriment.

For, inexplicably, the disaster had cost thousands of lives. From office and home and street, in that dazing instant, the victims had abruptly vanished. Bewildered survivors found themselves addressing empty air, or passing food to a vacant plate. The vanished left no clue.

The bodies were never recovered. Near New York, however, which had suffered most heavily, a sinister thing was found. Upon the Jersey Palisades lay a queer gray area of lifeless desolation, and near its center, where lovely Alpine Park had been, was a wide circle of strange squat earthen mounds.

The mounds were swiftly crumbling. But apprehensive explorers, venturing into the unpleasant labyrinth of burrows

beneath them, found a few gruesome relics identified with the missing persons. No single human fragment, however, had been found when the tunnels caved in.

The world has had no explanation of this amazing tragedy. The astrophysicists, it is true, put their learned heads together, called up the shades of Einstein and Minkowski, and spoke sagely of a flaw in the space-time continuum. The press caught up their magic words, and the whole planet was soon informed that it was a Time Fault which had made six months seem like the winking of an eye. Neither savants nor newspapers, however, could account for the vanished thousands, or explain the grisly mounds in that queerly devastated park upon the Palisades.

I am the only surviving man who knows the actual cause of the Time Fault, who experienced all the nerve-shattering horror of those six lost months, or who met face to face the incredible menace that stopped all the world. I found courage, then, to go ahead, believing that the inherent interest of what I have to tell will make up for any lack of literary adornment.

1. The Different Doctor Harding

On the morning of February 10, of fateful 1960, Doctor Aston Harding came into my room at the Aero Club. I was just three days returned from that season's very successful polar flight; clangorous New York still seemed a shining paradise, and any old acquaintance a welcoming angel. I greeted Harding like a brother — before I discovered that he wanted me to fly him back to the Antarctic, the very next week!

I put the answer to that in pretty plain words.

"We can't do that, Harding! There's just about six weeks of twilight left at the South Pole, before six months of winter set in. I know what it's like—I've just come from there!"

I ignored the set determination on his blank face.

"I'm fed up with silence and ice and frostbitten feet. What I want is jazz bands, and my ice in a frosty glass, and feet tapping on waxed hardwood. Sorry, Doctor, but it simply can't be done—not this season. Now, if you can wait until November——"

Harding set down the whisky soda I had mixed for him, and rose deliberately to stand over my chair. He was a tall man, his broad shoulders a little stooped but powerful; he had a ruddy skin and yellowish hair. A few years older than I, but still under forty, he was already distinguished in both philanthropy and science.

I had always liked Harding, for a quick generosity and a spirit of genuine fellowship, almost as much as I admired the girl he had married: lovely Jerry Ware. I was indebted to him, as director of the Planet Research Foundation, for substantial aid to my polar flights. He had been a good friend—and I was deeply shocked, now, to see the change in him.

His pale blue eyes fixed me with a penetration that I found disquieting, and his low voice, a new strange hardness in it, rapped:

"Yes, Dunbar, you're going to fly us to the Pole—this season!" His eyes, always before so genially mild, were suddenly sharp as gimlets. "An explorer, you want fame: you want to advance science: you want money for another expedition. You've got a price, Dunbar—what is it?"

A very rude reply was on my tongue. But my respect for the old Doctor Harding, my old friendship for Jerry Ware, rose up in time to check the words. And Harding stabbed at me with an almost menacing forefinger.

"We've got the biggest proposition you ever had a nibble at, Dunbar," his harsh voice crackled at me. "We're going to reclaim Antarctica. We're going to thaw the ice cap with atomic power!"

He paused a moment to let that sink in, his keen pale eyes boring into my face.

"An invention of Meriden Bell's," his rasp went on. "You know him. This is confidential, Dunbar; I trust you. We've formed a syndicate. Five of us. My wife and I, Bell and Tommy Veering—and yourself."

At last I swallowed my amazement, and:

"Thaw the ice!" I blurted. "Harding, you don't know what you're talking about. I've spent years there. Remember what Antarctica is: five million square miles, covered with ice up to a mile deep, with temperatures seventy to a hundred below! Thaw—*that?*"

"It can be done!" he rapped. "You talk to Bell. And there are millions in it. Billions. For all five of us. I've put you down for four per cent, plus expenses." His tone became unpleasantly dictatorial. "Get ready, Dunbar, to fly us down in your *Austral Queen*—by the end of next week."

"If that's all you want, Harding——"

I bit my tongue, and held open the door. Something, some indefinable quality in his bearing, made me want desperately to hit him. It was his old friendship that held my arm, and Jerry Ware.

I was still hurt and puzzled by this harsh dictatorial insolence in a man who had been the most patient and generous of my friends, when the phone rang again that afternoon, and I was surprized to hear the voice of Harding's wife.

A discord of anxious worry marred its old sweet music.

"Ron!" she cried eagerly. "How are you?"

Jerry had been, and was, perhaps the friend held closest in my lonely life. But I must make it clear, against possible misunderstanding, that I did not love her, nor she me. I had sincerely congratulated the Hardings on their marriage, believing them perfectly mated. The change in her husband distressed me deeply, for I knew what it must mean to Jerry.

Her voice was quivering, now, pleading.

"Ron, if Aston's way provoked you, I am sorry. I must explain about him. He had an—illness, two years ago. He had been working late in his office at the Foundation—some Government research, on account of the Pacific War. And one night he—disappeared.

"I was frantic. The police couldn't find him. I was afraid he was—dead. It was two weeks before he came to himself, stumbling along a highway out in Jersey.

"It was amnesia. Still he can't remember what happened. There was evidence that somebody had broken into his office. The police thought an Asiatic spy might have attacked him, to get some secret. But he doesn't know. And since——"

Her low voice caught, choked.

"Since, he seems different—sharp and impatient — sometimes cruel. And still there are lapses in his memory, details he can't recall. I have to help him. For he's still"—she choked again—"still dear to me. And promise me, Ron, that you'll forgive him, bear with him."

"I promise, Jerry," I told her.

"Oh, thank you." It was a glad, eager cry. "And, Ron, will you come out to dinner tonight? There's to be a meeting of the syndicate, afterward, to discuss the expedition."

"I'll be there, Jerry, to see you. But I warn you, I'm not flying back to the Pole —not this season."

Her gay little laugh ignored that last.

"Thanks, Ron," she said. Doctor Bell will pick you up at seven."

Meriden Bell—old "Merry" Bell! I was eager to see him, and yet dreaded the encounter. I had known him well when he worked at the Foundation, before the terrible events that shattered his career and estranged him from the world.

His genius had been a flame in him, in the old days. Radiant good spirits had sparkled in his eyes. I knew that things were different, now. I had hardly seen him for two years, but the outline of his tragedy was familiar to me: it is part of the blackest chapter in American history.

Three years before, a day came back to me when I had called on Bell in his biological laboratory at the Foundation, which then occupied a gray old building at the edge of the Jersey meadows. Harding had already hinted that Bell's bacteriological research was the greatest of the century, but I was nevertheless surprized.

All that long-past summer afternoon came back: the air in the laboratory a little stuffy, unpleasant with a vague odor of formaldehyde; the north light gleaming on microscopes, incubators, centrifuges, and specimen jars; Bell, a tall blue-eyed man, young and slender in laboratory white, eagerly busy over a spectroscope.

He came to meet me, turned to point dramatically at a test-tube that held a few drops of an amber fluid.

"My triumph, Ron!" Eager elation rang in his low voice. "That is my Culture V 13—the perfect bacteriophage! It is a filterable virus that will destroy any living thing, any bacterium, any malignant organism. When I have developed the control—a specific protection for the cells of the human body—it can eradicate all disease!"

"All disease!"

Awed by the might of this slender man's genius, perhaps a little incredulous before his sudden promise of universal health, I reached out gingerly to touch the tube in its rack. Bell swiftly caught my arm, and:

"Don't!" his tense voice warned. "If one drop touched you, Ron—or the millionth of a drop—nothing could save you! Nothing—until I have developed the specific control."

I turned somewhat apprehensively—for those few brown drops seemed suddenly more terrible than all the blizzards of Antarctica—and came face to face with the most dreadful man I have ever seen.

2. *Five Against the Ice*

DREADFUL—no other word so fits that human monstrosity. Wearing a stained laboratory smock, he stood less than five feet tall. His back was horribly hunched, and his great gnarled hands slung forward like the limbs of a gorilla. Beneath sleek black hair, his face was a yellow, V-shaped mask. His eyes, set deep beneath dense, bushy dark brows that sloped to make a smaller V, were black also—and his most appalling feature.

They held me, his eyes, in a sort of shrinking fascination, because they were—hideous. One was oddly red-flecked around the contracted pupil, with an evil, glittering red. The other was strangely dilated, a fearsome inscrutable midnight orb that seemed to have no iris.

Those dark, mismated eyes were fixed on the yellow liquid in the tube with an intensity somehow terrifying. Beneath the ugly blankness of the yellow, pointed face I sensed a sinister storm of suppressed emotion: a mad black yearning, a bitter, burning hatred, a savage and triumphant gloating.

I started back, appalled as if some bottomless crevasse had abruptly snapped

open before me. Bell made a hasty introduction:

"Ron, this is Doctor Kroll. Captain Dunbar, meet Doctor Mawson Kroll, who is assisting my biological research."

The hunchback had started also, and all hint of that yearning and hatred and gloating was instantly gone from the yellow V of his face—though he couldn't erase its stifled, searing fury from my mind. The hand he gave me was unpleasantly cold.

"Doctor Bell has made a remarkable discovery." Kroll's voice was oily and yet grating, unpleasant as his breath. "One the world will not forget."

The horror to come must have been already in his twisted mind—perhaps I had seen its birth. But only afterward did I see the sardonic second meaning in his words.

The Pacific War was fought during my next polar expedition, ended before I knew of its beginning; for the censored radio carried no news.

The American air forces, supported by the fleet, had already won a swift and brilliant victory, when Bell's "Culture V 13" fell mysteriously into the hands of the enemy. Nevertheless, by the last vengeful order of a defeated and mortally wounded commander, three surviving Asiatic planes sprayed the bacteriophage along the Pacific coast. From Seattle to San Diego, it took a million and a quarter lives, hideously.

Hideously — for every droplet that touched a human body started an incurable sore, a bleeding crater of agony that spread implacably, swiftly destroying skin and flesh and bone, until not life alone but every vestige of the corpse was consumed.

On that terrible morning, when a whole nation was stunned with horror and death, high military authorities called on Meriden Bell, at his laboratory. His skill could do nothing: the dead were dead, and Asiatic vengeance satisfied. Bell admitted that his bacteriophage must have caused the deaths, but could not account for its possession by the enemy. He was arrested, tried by court-martial, convicted of treason—then suddenly exonerated, when the guilt was pinned upon Mawson Kroll.

For Bell's assistant had taken flight, leaving a trunk filled with Asiatic gold. In the intercepted communications of the enemy were found letters in which Kroll demanded, as payment for his treason, to be made Emperor of America.

The fugitive hunchback was arrested, two weeks later, on the Mexican border. Stupidly he denied his guilt, even his own identity. An alienist pronounced him criminally insane. Tried in a military court, he was convicted by the overwhelming weight of circumstantial evidence, shot by a firing-squad.

Bell abandoned his experiments, destroyed his records and various cultures at the Foundation, by military command. His brilliant mind, it seemed for months, had been shattered by the disaster. He was forcibly restrained from suicide, committed to an asylum.

His tortured brain had assumed the guilt of a million murders. The psychiatrists, if they failed to unburden him altogether of Kroll's crime, at least convinced him that he might best make atonement by living. He had come back to the Foundation before my last expedition, to begin research in a newly opened field of sub-atomic physics.

Now, when Bell came to meet me in the winter gloom that filled the halls of the Aero Club, I saw that he had never escaped the shadow of that tragedy. He was frail and thin, his blue eyes dark with brooding. His white pinched face looked as if it never smiled. The eager-

ness of his greeting, however, was almost pathetic.

"Good old Ron," he whispered, and felt the muscle of my shoulder with his pale fingers as if we were schoolboys again. "You must thrive on cold—you're looking like a red-headed Hercules."

"But I've had enough of winter for this season, Merry," I told him. "What I'm looking for is warmth and women and laughter." And I asked hopefully, "Harding wasn't possibly joking, about this project to thaw the ice cap?"

"No, Ron." Bell's pale thin face was abruptly serious, almost grimly resolute. "We're going to do it, all right. The equipment will be ready in a week. And you are the only man with experience enough to take us where we want to go, at this season. We're going to the Stapledon Basin——"

"The Stapledon Basin—right across the Pole!" That got me. "Surely, Merry, you haven't considered how difficult—or impossible—it would be to thaw a continent of ice!"

His dark eyes came gravely to my face, and in them was some commanding power, some deep reflection of his old supernal genius, that silenced my protests.

"But I *have* considered, Ron," he said quietly. "And I have solved every problem. I have developed an atomic battery that will supply ample power—it is still secret; what I tell you is confidential."

"Atomic power?"

He nodded.

"It is a hydro-helium vacuum cell. We call it the Atom-Builder. It builds hydrogen atoms into helium. Four hundred grams of hydrogen gives you three ninety-nine of helium, plus one of pure energy. A gram of energy is a great deal, Ron. A few tons of water will be all the fuel we need. We shall burn ice to thaw Antarctica!"

I was speechless to that. Merry went on gravely:

"Your plane will carry all the equipment we need. I have designed a heat-beam radiator, transformers, tower — everything. Harding has formed a syndicate to put up the money. We are all meeting tonight——"

"Listen, Merry," I started to object. "Harding is taking just a little too much for granted. So far as I'm concerned——"

His white fingers caught my arm.

"But, Ron, old man, you don't understand." His voice was hoarse, quivering. "This is the chance for me to make up for what I have done. One discovery of mine took a million lives. If another could open up a new continent, where millions could live, it would help settle the score."

He gulped. His tortured eyes searched my face.

"That's all I've been working for, Ron, since I—came back. You won't stop me —will you?"

No resisting that. "All right, Merry," I told him.

His thin hand wrung mine.

"Thanks, old man!" He was almost sobbing. "We'll be ready to fly by the eighteenth. You can have the *Austral Queen* in shape? There will be five of us going, and no others."

"But Jerry Harding!" I protested. "She isn't going—not into such hardship and danger. Some of my men might be persuaded to return——"

"No others!" An old bitterness was hard in Bell's voice. "This thing is secret —there won't be another Mawson Kroll!" His dark eyes stared at me, so terrible that I looked away. "And Jerry will hear of nothing else but going," he went on. "There'll be just the five of us, against the ice."

3. *The Dweller in the Pylon*

WE FOUND the Hardings at their uptown apartment, and Tommy Veering. Jerry Harding was her old self: slender, gray-eyed, charming; yet I could see her deep concern for her husband. She hovered anxiously near him, twice came swiftly to his aid when his memory seemed to stumble upon a momentary blank.

Veering was a slim, slick-haired young chap, whose smiling brown eyes held a diffident appeal. A new protegé of Harding's, he had been with the Foundation since his graduation. For all his youth, he was already distinguished in electronic engineering.

He listened intently as Bell briefly outlined the momentous plan, after we had eaten. Keen enthusiasm lit his boyish face. Eagerly, he gripped Bell's hand.

"Wonderful, Doctor Bell! It — it's great. You have given the world another world!" And he began a question: "Your precise sub-atomic formulæ——?"

"If I have revealed enough to convince you," Merry Bell said gravely, "I shall reserve the rest until we have reached the site of operations." Old bitterness shadowed his voice again. "So there cannot be another——" He bit his thin lip. "I have listed the equipment we shall need."

Veering's enthusiasm ended indecision. We went on to plan the expedition: plotted a schedule for the flight to the frozen Stapledon Basin, that would be a race against the swift-falling polar night; listed our essential supplies and the nine tons of Bell's equipment against the maximum capacity of my loyal old plane, the *Austral Queen.*

It was two o'clock when I got back to my room at the club, elated with this mad dream of conquering the polar world, yet troubled with vague apprehensions inspired by the change in Doctor Harding.

I was thinking moodily, too, of the mockery in Bell's old nickname, for if ever I had seen a man walking alive in hell, it was surely he. It was worth all the risk and folly of the flight, I thought, to alleviate his torture. I went to bed, and, of old habit, fell immediately asleep.

From this point it is difficult for me to go on. Much of the remainder of this history must deal with facts and beings that will appear incredible in the severe light of established science.

I share the reluctance of the orthodox scientist to admit anything not proven by objective observations and beyond all doubt, for I know too well the possible subjective vagaries of the human mind. I am sensitive, too, of any charges of sensationalism or mistreatment of the truth.

Yet it is my obvious duty to omit nothing that happened, however fantastic or ill-supported the account of it may seem. To leave out anything would distort the whole. Perhaps it is to be expected, after all, that the circumstances leading up to the incredible phenomenon of the Time Fault should appear equally astounding.

I WOKE suddenly in my dim-lit room. The city had grown almost quiet. The illuminated hands of the electric clock showed five minutes past three—I had been sleeping no more than an hour.

The sound that had waked me was totally unfamiliar—unless perhaps it suggested the song of some tiny, exotic tropical bird. Its plaintive keenness held a wail of lonely despair, yet somehow it was heart-piercingly sweet.

I sat up in bed abruptly, less frightened than merely startled although my heart was thudding. My hand went toward the light. Before I touched the switch, however, I saw what was in the room. And all movement left me.

My incredible visitor was floating a yard off the floor, beside my bed. It

shone with a pale light of its own, so that I had no need of the electrics. A brief high note came from it again, keen with lonely longing, and somehow telling me not to be afraid.

A being beyond conception, supernal! An exquisite rosy shell, floating upright, flushed with a living light. Its fluted spirals tapered to a point, below. Its gleaming lips, flared out like a vase of pearl, held the bust of an elfin woman.

Maru—Mora!

Her tiny shoulders were covered with a fine golden down. Her delicate head was—or seemed—the head of a pigmy queen. But the golden plates that crowned it, I knew, and the plumed scarlet crest above, were living part of her.

Her small pointed face was whiter than alabaster, and imperial in its pride. Her eyes were huge, purple, limpid. They were round and sober with the innocence of a child's; they were inscrutable with ageless wisdom; they were dark wells of agony, ancient and ageless.

Her lips were a tiny crimson wound. They were full, almost sensuous. They smiled at me, with a faint twist of malice.

Maru-Mora. I knew that she was nothing human. Yet my fancy ever made her so, for eyes and lips and even the impudent flirt of her crimson plume held all the essence of humanity: wisdom and the vain yearning to forget, pride and bitter defeat, hot passion and long frustration, hope and despair, bright courage and consuming fear, living joy and ultimate, infinite agony.

Against all that, it mattered not if she had a golden carapace instead of hair, if her great eyes were lidless, if her facial economy seemed to provide no nostrils. Bodily, she might have more in common with the mollusk than with man, but some chord in her spirit touched the human, none the less.

Altogether, elfin bust and pearly vase, she was less than four feet tall. And the flying shell, I knew, was as much a part of her, as much alive, as the shining crest or her purple eyes.

I sat in the bed, staring at her, bewildered, incredulous. She should have been a dream. The fastened window—for the room was air-conditioned—had not been disturbed; the door was still locked. But here she was. And I was as wide awake as I had ever been. I heard the distant thunder of an elevated train.

The red lips pouted, the keen voice came again, like a whistling, saying, as I sensed its wordless meaning: *Do not be afraid*. The shining being drifted a little toward my bed, settled toward me. Over the lip of the shell reached a slender arm, bright with golden fur.

The hand that reached for me was tiny, infinitely delicate, seven-fingered. It was thumbless, the middle finger longest. The nails were narrow, pointed, crimson. For all its golden strangeness, it was beautiful, and, to me, a hand.

The keen piping, so lonely, so sorrowfully sweet, wailed again. I looked into the infinite wells of those purple eyes. And something made me put up my own big hand, grasp those tiny furry fingers.

Instantly, incredibly, I was snatched out of my body.

I know how utterly fantastic, impossible, that must seem. But I had an instant's impression of my body left behind in that dim room, sitting bolt-upright and motionless in the bed. Then we were plunging upward, outside, above the dark building and the restless city.

Southward we soared—that shining being beside me, drawing me by the hand, for my form was still the same, even if my body lay behind—across slumbering continents and over dark whispering oceans.

We swept into the frigid gray twilight that lay upon the polar lands. I recog-

nized the very Mountains of Despair, of which my party had made an aerial survey on the last expedition, and lying vast and desolate beyond them, the Stapledon Basin.

And down we sloped again, across gray crevasse-riven glaciers, toward a towering transpolar range that I had glimpsed in the distance, called the Mountains of Uranus, but had never reached.

As we dropped toward those black granite peaks, bleakly stark, frost-shattered, yet rearing so majestically from the eternal ice, I was amazed to see what seemed a building, with twin hexagonal towers, projecting above the naked wind-swept ledges of a rounded summit.

This structure—I hardly know a name for it—seemed deeply anchored in the living granite. Its material was unfamiliar: ice-clear and richly purple, like some unimaginable colossal amethyst. Its low massive outline somewhat suggested those towered gateways of the ancient Egyptians that archeologists call pylons. But it had no opening; it appeared doorless, windowless, one solid block of flawless crystal.

Near it, however, a wide fissure cleft the black summit. Worn stone steps, freshly swept free of snow, led down into it. At their foot was a massive door of black metal, battered and corroded as if by the impact of ages.

WE SETTLED down upon the barren ledge above the fissure. I stood upon the snow-patched granite—or it seemed that I did, for I was still aware that my body lay back in New York. And the shining being floated beside me, the golden tendrils of her fingers still grasping my hand.

A weirdly unforgettable scene. The stark black mountain beneath us towering above the gray infinity of ice. The midnight sun burning low and ominously red in the misty distance. The immemorial mass of that towered crystal block, strange with deep-cut glyphs, looming above us like the enigmatic monument of some lost and forgotten race.

But the being at my side was looking down at that ancient black door. Her eery piping keened out again, calling. A little time went by. Then a girl opened the door, and came running lightly up the steps.

She was beautiful—slender, tall, filled with the glory of young womanhood. Her trim clothing was strangely cut from some pure white fur. The one strand of hair that escaped her close-fitting cap was a gorgeous ruddy gold. Her oval face was very fair, the forehead high and white. Her wide blue eyes were burning with some new-born eagerness.

Beautiful. . . . My stumbling words could never convey her perfect loveliness. I looked at her, drank deep of her vital splendor, for some old, haunting thirst was being satisfied. She held some elusive perfection that I had sought, for many weary years, in many lands, even in my polar explorations, and never glimpsed before.

Beautiful. . . . I knew instantly that I wanted her, to possess and to serve, to love, for ever. And I knew, bitterly, that this was was only some strange dream, that I really lay still—or my body did—back in New York City.

"Maru-Mora!"

The girl ran to the flying being, with that eager greeting on her tongue. She embraced those golden shoulders, lightly, gently. A tiny golden-furred hand stroked her head, affectionately. Then the keen thin piping of Maru-Mora came again, and the girl turned eagerly toward me.

"I know your name: you are Ron Dunbar," she said, surprizingly. She spoke English. Her voice was low, faint-

ly awkward, as if she were little used to speech. It was soft, deeply rich, delicious. "I am Karalee," she said. "Maru-Mora brought you here to her dwelling—or a part of you—so that I might speak to you, for her."

I—or the "part of me"—stood drinking in her sheer, glowing loveliness. Swift admiration had conquered my old diffidence with women, even my present amazement. I stood merely looking, delighted, until suddenly I was afraid that my gaze might offend or discomfit the girl.

"I'm glad that she did," I said. "And I wish that she had brought all of me, so that perhaps I could stay."

Deep and serene, the girl's clear blue eyes looked into mine. Her full lips quivered suddenly; her white nostrils flared to a deeper breath; her deep bosom lifted.

"I wish, Ron Dunbar," her low voice said simply, "that you could stay."

Afterward, I was surprized at my swift surrender to a woman in a dream. But emotion, as well as thought, all through that incredible experience, seemed more direct and clear than common. Some old restraint was left behind.

"I'll come again," I found myself promising the girl. "Now I know the way. I'll fly back to these very mountains. Next time, all of me—for you."

Eagerness shone bright on her face.

"You will come, Ron — for me?" Gleaming tears misted her eyes. "And sometime—we can go out together—out into the World?"

The sweet exotic piping of Maru-Mora came again then, swiftly urgent. The girl Karalee looked up at that supernal being, and back to me. And all the eagerness had gone from her face. It was a pale, bleak oval, stricken. The tears were gone. Her eyes were dry, dark with pain.

"No, Ron, you must never come back." Her voice was steady and low. "That is what Maru-Mora brought you to hear. You must never fly your machine into this land again. You must promise that."

I looked at her, sharing all the agony written on her white face.

"But I'm coming back," I said, "before the sun is gone. I'm coming to take you away, Karalee——"

Her face brightened for a moment, to a tortured eagerness of longing. She looked up again at the silent fantastic shape of Maru-Mora.

"No, Ron Dunbar," her voice came slow and heavy with regret. "You must not come to this land again." Her tone quivered. "Never—not even for me. Maru-Mora forbids it."

I looked up at the shining being that still held my hand in her tiny furry fingers, demanding:

"Why?"

4. *"They That Sleep"*

AGAIN that eldritch, plaintive piping sobbed from the elfin woman's head, gold-crowned and scarlet-plumed, above that flaring opalescent shell. Again the fair girl Karalee, so lovely in her trim white furs, rendered translation:

"It is true, Ron Dunbar, that you are planning to fly here again, with new companions, before this sun is gone?"

"It is," I said, surprized.

"It is true," Karalee gave the next question, "that your purpose is to thaw the ice from all this world?"

Perhaps I shouldn't have been amazed at that. After all, Maru-Mora had come to New York after me. It didn't much increase the wonder of it, I suppose, that she now displayed knowledge of what had occurred there, that evening, in Harding's apartment.

For an instant, however, I was speechless. A strange fear chilled and shook

me, until I looked up into those great purple orbs. They came down to my face, and I felt a warmth of supernal peace. The fear was gone.

"That's right," I said. "We're going to use atomic power. Doctor Bell hopes to make the whole continent temperate, and open it up to settlement."

"Then you must give up the plan," Karalee rendered the swift reply. "For the ice must never be thawed. . . . Death is sleeping under the ice, Ron Dunbar—the death of all the world! Take care lest you rouse it."

"Death?" I demanded. "What do you mean?"

Then took place the strangest and certainly the most terrible part of all that incredible adventure.

We still stood together beside that colossal purple pylon, on the naked granite of that frozen peak. Red as blood, the midnight sun burned low in the horizonless distance, where the gray illimitable desert of ice merged with the gray and featureless sky. A bitter wind howled and moaned about the towers of the pylon. I was insensible of any cold, but the girl Karalee was already pale, shivering. She had gestured toward the steps that led down to the door in the rock.

"Let us go down into my rooms," she said. "It is warmer there." Dark with longing and regret, her eyes looked at Maru-Mora, and back at me. "If you are forbidden ever to return, at least——"

Maru-Mora's piping cut her off. As if answering a command, the girl stepped quickly to the flying being. She held out a mittened hand. Tiny golden fingers clasped it.

"Come," the girl translated. "Maru-Mora is carrying us to see the peril that you must not rouse. It is They That Sleep."

We rose again. I had the briefest glimpse of Karalee left standing on that frozen ledge, her arm rigidly extended. Yet she was with us also, drawn by Maru-Mora's other hand—drawn out of her body, as I had been.

We three soared swiftly through chill gray mists, descended upon a rugged ice-plain from which jutted great boulders of granite, black, naked, shattered with the frost of ages. We stood at the brink of a dark crevasse. Karalee pointed across it.

Her lips moved twice before she could speak, and her voice came muffled, breathless, choked with horror.

"There," she said. "One of Them. It is the Watcher."

I shuddered at sight of that monstrous thing. It stood upright upon a cragged boulder, and it did not move. The body of it was black, covered with great scales, a swollen elongated thing shaped like an immense barrel. It stood upon three black tentacular limbs, whose extremities had coiled like mighty serpents to grasp the granite.

Head, it had none. But the bulged upper end of the black body was broken with a great sharp triangular projection, which looked like a hideous snout. Three scaled triangular flaps, just about its swollen equatorial belt, might, I thought, cover strange organs of sense.

This creature was utterly horrifying, in a sense I can hardly define. Its horror held nothing familiar. If Maru-Mora was clearly non-human, it was certainly non-terrestrial. It chilled me with an elemental, absolute revulsion.

I knew that the girl was sick and cold with dread. I heard her make a pleading little whistle: her human imitation of the voice of Maru-Mora. Her strained hoarse whisper came to me, urgent:

"Look swiftly, Ron, so that we can go. I do not like these things. But Maru-Mora says you must see——"

The black monstrosity, indeed, held my gaze with a fascination of utter terror. It had been there, motionless, a long time. The great black scales were silvered with frost. Snow was banked beyond it. The ice had climbed up over the coils of its ophidian limbs.

The boulder was cracked, I saw, shattered. Time had splintered the granite since those giant tentacles first grasped it. Only their frozen pressure held it from crumbling. How many centuries?

Surely, after so long, I thought, it must be dead—and I knew that it was not. Nothing dead could inspire such resistless fear. I sensed—or fancied—a slow, implacable beat, like a pulse of evil, measured, menacing, mind-shattering.

I flinched suddenly, turned away, hid my eyes with a trembling hand. I fought a strange and elemental sickness, a newborn horror that gnawed worm-like at the marrow of my bones. It brought a flood of vast relief when:

"Come," said Karalee. "We go to see the others."

We left that stark eternal black sentinel overlooking the glaciers. We soared swiftly through the leaden mists, came down upon ridged and fissured ice.

"The others," said the girl, "are all about their ship, beneath the ice."

Driven by a fascinated compulsion to see all I could, even though the horror of it should consume me, I was striving in vain to peer down through the gray-white obscurity of the ice—when suddenly we were beneath it!

Down through the darkness of the glacier we plunged, as swiftly as through the air above. The ice was all around us, like a blue-green liquid.

And suddenly we were standing again on a long ridge of granite. We were far beneath the glacier, which was like a thick green-black mist above us. I could see little at first, but gradually my vision sharpened—or perhaps Maru-Mora in some manner shared her own strange senses with me—and I perceived the great valley beyond and below us.

Dim in the green haze of the ice, I presently distinguished a cyclopean machine. Resting on tremendous skids which lay far along the floor of the valley, it was all of darkly gleaming red-black metal. A colossal bulging hull, surrounded with a confusion of struts and braces, masts and booms and metal arms, mysterious rods and vanes, towered even above the ridge where we stood. It was like the bloated body of some monstrous spider, crouching with folded limbs, set to spring.

Here and there about those crimson planes and arms, frozen motionless in the green mist of ice, I saw black and hideous beings like the Watcher: scaled bodies headless and bulging, supported on triple ophidian limbs.

An alien horror touched me, as we stood on that black ridge beneath the ice. It was the stark menace of the Outside: the terror of worlds strange beyond conception, of powers and entities supernal, monstrous, utterly alien. That stark, wondering, elemental dread—some dim instinctive inkling of it, I think, is at the basis of many primitive religions—is the most terrible emotion a human being can feel.

DIMLY through the numbness of my dread, as if I dreamed within a dream, I heard the piping of Maru-Mora, and Karalee spoke:

"That is the ship that came from—Beyond. And They are the Tharshoon. They came to conquer Earth. That was in another age, before the ice came here. This was a fair world, then, and my people ruled it. Man was not born."

I knew that this was Maru-Mora

speaking, through the lips of the wide-eyed, terror-dazed girl.

"The Tharshoon brought fearsome weapons: giant needles that poured out terrible red flame. Even their eyes could stare us into—nothingness. And we had none. We had been a people of peace.

"The invaders attacked our white cities, overwhelmed them in horror and death. We were without defense, until I, the Seeker, who had long since given up my body on the altar of science, discovered a power that made them sleep.

"By that time, it was too late to save my people. They all had perished. But I lived—when rather I had died. I stopped the Tharshoon, in the hour of their victory. And I have stood guard upon them, whom I could not destroy."

The half-chanting voice of Karalee—speaking, I knew, the thoughts of the strange elder being—had become oddly like the piping of Maru-Mora. It was plaintively sorrowful, weary with age-old loneliness, piercing with a yearning beyond words.

"The world has changed its axis. The ice has come to bind the sleepers more securely. Your race of man has risen from the northern jungle beasts. And still I wait and watch. . . . And the Tharshoon shall not wake!"

However amazing that scrap of Earth-history, it was, in my singular mental state, somehow credible. I knew Antarctica had once been tropical; it is rich with coal seams; our survey had revealed a rich Jurassic fossil flora of ferns, conifers and cycads, within fifty miles of the pole; I was familiar with the various theories of axial shift and continental drift. For the rest of it, the hideous forms of the invaders and the Seeker's exotic beauty were here before my eyes.

Yes, I accepted it without question, then. And the ray of understanding merely increased my shocked and reeling dread. Maru-Mora was piping again, and the girl said anxiously:

"Come. We must return. Maru-Mora's strength is low. Should it fail, we all must perish."

For myself, I was eager to escape. The green mist of ice was suddenly crushing, suffocating. And I was sick from the overwhelming horror of that ship and its monstrous crew.

But the tiny golden fingers tightened on my hand, and the girl's. We left the black ridge beside that vessel from "Beyond," drove upward through the malachite haze of the ice. We swept over the glaciers again, toward the towering black range and the time-battered summit where the purple pylon stood.

I glimpsed the girl's body waiting, rigid in its furs—not a muscle had moved since we left. Then we were beside it, and there was but one Karalee. Blue with cold, shuddering, she began beating her mittened hands stiffly against her sides.

The Seeker piped again, and she turned to me, gasping:

"You have seen them, now, Ron Dunbar. The eternal Sleepers—if they are waked, your world will die! Let them sleep—do not try to thaw the ice—and don't come back again."

"But I am coming back." I tugged toward her, against the strange strength of Maru-Mora's hand. "For I love you, Karalee."

The shivering girl started toward me, eagerly. But the eery voice of Maru-Mora stopped her. The white oval of her face went starkly rigid. Her wide blue eyes turned dark with dread.

"No, Ron, don't come back!" she sobbed. "For you will die, and I, and all the world——"

The Seeker piped again, imperatively. The girl turned slowly, as if in reluctant

obedience. Her dry eyes looked back at me, black with tragedy, mutely imploring. She tried to speak, and could not. She went stiffly, at last, down the steps in the fissure, and through the black door.

"Karalee——" I called after her, vainly. The door closed ponderously. I was still staring at it when I felt the Seeker's tiny fingers tugging at my hand.

She drew me toward the side of the pylon. The purple transparency of it towered sheer out of the black granite. Frost of ages had splintered and crumbled the stone, blizzards of ages carved it grotesquely. That cyclopean crystal, however, remained diamond-hard, diamond-polished; it was deeply graven with the lost runes of a world dead before the coming of the ice.

One moment she paused against that amethystine wall. Wondrous being! A fluted spiral vase of opalescent pearl, holding flower-like an elfin queen, golden-robed and golden-crowned, crimson-plumed. Last and greatest of a people lost! Maru-Mora, the Seeker!

The deep purple wells of her immense eyes regarded me soberly, as if with unuttered warning. Her delicate seven-fingered hand gestured toward Karalee's door. Her scarlet mouth pouted to a single admonishing note.

Then her furry fingers released me. As easily as we had entered the ice, she drifted through that adamantine wall, into the crystal pylon. She seemed to relax. For an instant I watched her still, sinking peacefully through its pellucid depths.

Then I turned. I tried to walk back toward the crevice in the rock that opened to Karalee's abode. But the world splintered about me. I was crushed beneath a black, appalling avalanche of pain. . . .

And then I was in bed again, back in my room at the Aero Club.

5. *Beyond the Pole*

EVEN now, writing these words, I am overcome with a black tide of guilt. For the warning in that singular vision had been explicit, unmistakable. Had I but been wise enough to heed it, what untold horror and death might have been averted!

The silent hands of the electric clock, when I looked, stood at three-forty. My body, which had lain thirty-five minutes uncovered and motionless, was stiff with cold, yet strangely damp with sweat. A blinding headache splintered through the back of my brain. Clambering uncertainly out of the bed, I found myself trembling with nervous exhaustion, sound heart fluttering as if it had come through some terrific strain.

At first I could hardly stand, but I felt better as movement restored circulation. I wouldn't, I decided, call a doctor; what I wanted was a chance to think over what had happened. After a few turns around the room, I took two aspirins, smoked out a pipe, and went back to bed—but not to sleep that night.

For my mind was still too full of Maru-Mora's supernal wonder; of the immemorial ice-drowned horror of the Sleepers; of Karalee's young intoxicating beauty. Desperately I wrestled with the terrible question: had it been real, or a dream?

It all had been absolutely convincing as it passed; doubt had only come afterward. It had seemed too perfect in detail, too strangely coherent, too fearfully alien, to be a dream—for the dreaming mind commonly reflects only the familiar patterns of the day, creating nothing new. But the stiff orthodoxy of my scientific training balked at accepting it as anything more than dream.

Could the human mind exist outside the body?—fly ten thousand miles and

back in half an hour?—dive a mile beneath the ice cap?

That was childish superstition; any enlightened savage would know better.

The Seeker—was she possible? A prehuman being as high as mankind—or higher; ageless dweller in a crystal block; flitting intangibly over the planet at the speed of thought! Who would believe my tale of Maru-Mora?

The Tharshoon—could such monstrosities be? Could sentient invaders have crossed the gulf from some unimaginable Beyond? Assuming that they came when a tropical wilderness covered the present polar continent, could they have survived ten or a hundred million years beneath the ice? The scientist in me answered those questions with an outraged "No!"

Moreover, at the risk of greater blame, but for the sake of honesty, I must confess that even if I had been fairly convinced of the reality of that experience—still I might have gone. For a kind of foolhardiness—or it may be only egotism—has made me ever seek danger rather than avoid it. Not that I am fearless, at all; merely that great peril has a resistless fascination, even when it terrifies me.

And then, besides, I had seen Karalee.

That is all my apology. I merely hope the reader will try to understand why I chose to ignore that singular warning—why I strove to credit it, in my own mind, to a heavy supper and my worries about Doctor Harding and our flight to the south.

I SAID nothing at all to my associates about that astounding dream. Our preparations were completed with little delay. On the afternoon of February 21, the last bulky crates of Bell's atomic apparatus were stowed aboard the *Austral Queen*, moored in San Francisco Bay. The next morning we took off for Antarctica, via Honolulu, Suva, and Dunedin.

We were five. Remembering the loyal faith of Jerry Ware, I might have known that no husband of hers would go into peril without her by his side.

A strange haze that forewarned of an early blizzard met us, as we came down across the dark polar sea. In the pale light of the low sun reddening behind us in the north, it shimmered with a curious pellucid saffron radiance. The towering white-crowned icebergs loomed out of it with a suddenness always startling.

Flying low, no more than a frail mote lost in the ominous immensity of this ice-walled sea at the bottom of the world, the *Austral Queen* soon battled a freezing headwind.

A big, four-motored amphibian transport, she had served me loyally through two previous expeditions. But she was too heavily laden, now, with the five of us, our winter's supplies and equipment, and the nine tons of Bell's apparatus.

The blizzard, as if to give warning of the grim night to come, met us with savage fury. Sometimes it drove us perilously close to the fangs of the ice; sometimes its opposing violence held us motionless.

Tommy Veering had spelled me at the controls, while I got a little sleep back on the dunnage that filled half the cabin, but he called me forward as the wind grew worse, in the sixties. I was tired—for all the flight had been a desperate race against the polar night. Yet, back at the controls, I found an old elation. I shared the victory of the ship as she defied the teeth of the ice and the sea's cold maw, and met the blows of the bitter wind.

Floes and bergs became more frequent, and at last the white pack was beneath us. The desolate Balleny Islands were behind. We veered a little eastward, around Cape Adare, and battled our way along the grim coast of South Victoria Land.

Dim-shrouded in the blizzard, the dark masses of Mount Erebus and Mount Ter-

ror crept down to our right, and at last the Ross Barrier came marching out of the ever-thickening saffron mists, a black and hostile wall towering hundreds of feet to the white desert of flying snow.

Jerry Harding had come up into the cockpit, after Veering went back, bringing hot coffee. Her brave gray eyes scanned the wall of ice ahead; then she looked at me, and her voice came quiet and grave:

"We are flying very low, Ron. Do you think——"

"I've been trying to keep under the wind," I said. "The ship is heavy, but she'll climb—she has to climb eighteen thousand feet to cross the passes into the Stapledon Basin. But she'll pull through."

"I hope so, Ron," Jerry said. "Aston has staked everything. . . . So much depends on us—a whole new world!"

The blizzard screaming off the ice shelf, as I brought the ship up, struck like the hand of a demoniac giant. She shuddered like a stricken thing, and plunged down again into the mist of ice crystal whipped off the frozen barrier.

Harding's wife stifled her instinctive cry of fear, but her white small hand went convulsively tight on my shoulder. Her gray eyes looked at me, big with that terrible question.

"It's all right, Jerry." I tried to get some calm into my voice. "The *Queen* has never failed me yet. She's brave—as a woman!"

And she didn't fail me then. She came up again, with motors thundering wide open, through that flying spume of frost. She hung, evenly battling the wind, for a heart-breaking moment above the frozen blade that edged the ice plateau. She sank—lifted—leapt ahead.

"And here we are—on the world we've come to conquer."

Jerry Harding caught a breath of relief, and her hand relaxed on my shoulder. She leaned across to peer down at the polar world, thickly misted with blizzard-whipped snow, savage-fanged with hummocks and pressure ridges, black-scarred with abysmal crevasses.

Then again something happened that it is difficult to account for in the cold rational light of established science. A small thing in itself, perhaps—merely the inexplicable sensation of an instant—but terrible in its significance.

I had looked aside at Jerry's frail loveliness, her pale lips now parted with a little smile. And some warning tentacle of cold reached suddenly into the insulated cabin, to touch my spine. Something, I know, made me shudder, made my trembling hands knot hard on the wheel.

It was a thing I could not explain, any more than the dream of the Seeker. But in that instant, as surely as if I had seen her lying in her coffin, I knew that Jerry was doomed.

She knew it, too. She felt the same ghastly intuition—that was the terrible part. Otherwise I should have ignored it, set it down to fatigue and my own vague fears, for I have never been ruled by hunches.

Her face went abruptly paler. She caught her breath, and her white lips set. For a moment her whole thin body was rigid. Then her gray eyes looked at me, suddenly dark, dreadful, shadowed with the doom I knew they had seen.

"Quite a bump, we passed," I said, as easily as I could. "Made me giddy for a moment, and nearly got the controls."

For a long, terrible moment, her tortured eyes looked into my face, straining as if to read some awful secret. I tried not to let her know I had shared that fearful premonition. At last she swallowed uneasily.

"Ron," she said uncertainly, "if—if anything should happen to me, please

look after Aston. He needs someone. He isn't—he's not quite himself."

And she left me, in a moment, and went back to her husband.

I TRIED to deny or forget that disturbing, uncanny sensation. But it clung and grew in my brain, like something evil and alive. And the difficulties ahead seemed suddenly a more terrible barrier than the wall of ice we had passed. Where lay any hope of success? What impress could four men and a woman make upon this eternal citadel of winter?

The tense hours passed. We drove on into the blizzard, above the featureless white surface of the Barrier. As our load of fuel was lightened, I fought for altitude to gain the passes and plateaus before us.

The barren summits of the Commonwealth Range behind, we flew up the long inlet of the Barrier, beside Queen Maud's Range. The *Austral Queen* labored bravely upward, battled the shrieking wind that hurled her at the black crags that walled a glacier-carven pass, and we were at last above the polar plateau.

We passed seventy miles to the left of the Pole itself. For two hours we fought the tempest that raged down beside the Mountains of Despair, across beyond the Pole, before we reached the only pass. It was the highest on the flight, and there we met the most savage wind. I had to drop half our reserve tanks of gasoline, before the ship found courage to lift above the barrier.

Beyond we came down into the Stapledon Basin: the site that Bell had chosen for our attempt to thaw the ice. It was an ice-clad plateau nine thousand feet high, walled on all sides with dark tremendous ranges towering above the glaciers.

Far across it, a hundred and forty miles away and invisible in the hazy fury of the blizzard, rose, I knew, that mighty unexplored transpolar range that I had glimpsed and named the Mountains of Uranus—on whose summit, in the dream, I had seen the purple pylon of the Seeker.

I had resolved to discount the dream. But now I found myself straining my eyes through the bleak gray mist, wondering, dwelling even upon the bright memory of the girl Karalee—until a jutting rocky ridge broke the ice beneath us, and it was time to land.

Wind and altitude made that landing difficult. The heavy-burdened plane came hurtling down far too swiftly. A black granite boulder loomed suddenly out of the blinding drift-snow whipped along the surface. Our skids crashed against the ice crust. The ship bounced, lurched awkwardly around the boulder, buried her nose in the drift beyond.

The flight was ended.

6. *The Haunted Camp*

I OPENED a hatch and dug my way to the surface. Merry Bell followed me up into the blizzard. It had moderated to a mere fifty-mile gale, but still at nine thousand feet, at forty below, it could pierce our furs and sear our lungs.

A welter of dark outcroppings of shattered granite and fantastically carved white drifts surrounded us. The desolate rugged ice beyond was like a wild sea congealed in the midst of a furious storm. The dark ranges that walled the Basin, fifty to eighty miles away, were lost in lead-gray mist.

Bell was staring about, shivering.

"This ridge is the summit of a mountain, buried under the glacier," I told him. "Our survey showed the ice over most of the Basin to be three to five thousand feet——"

His tortured thin face was suddenly warm with enthusiasm.

"It's just the spot I wanted, Ron," he was saying eagerly. "We'll set up the tower on the ridge. The atomic beam itself will reach to all these mountains. And the Basin, when it is warmed, will serve as a sort of furnace to moderate all the continent, with wind-convection, and warm rivers flowing down through the passes."

The breathless wonder of his dream caught me for a moment. I saw lush verdure replace the white desolation of ice, saw green forests blanket the black flanks of those mountains that had known no life for ten million years. I saw busy cities, even, rich plantations spread beneath the summer-long day, mines, railroads, factories.

"Once this land was warm," Bell's quick voice had run on. "Coal forests, in the Permo-Carboniferous——"

That brought back my haunting dream: the fantastic beauty of Maru-Mora, and all the alien horror of the Sleepers. Jerry Harding's voice reached me faintly from the plane, and I recalled the grim premonition that had struck me as we crossed the Barrier. I shuddered, and tried to forget.

"Our first problem is to build living-quarters," I told Bell. "If we don't—well, this is mild summer, compared to what is coming."

And we set to work at once, to establish a winter camp. For the plane we cut a sort of hangar in the ice, covered it with protecting blocks of snow. Our living-quarters also were hewn in the glacier, walled with the packing-cases that held our supplies, roofed with snow packed on tar-paper.

That occupied the most of our time until late in March—until the sun, wheeling ever lower and redder and huger and colder, peered for the last time through a pass in the Mountains of Uranus, and did not return.

None of the others had had any previous polar experience. All but Harding were willing to follow my leadership in building the camp. But he made himself difficult, to put it mildly.

He wanted Bell to begin erecting his atomic battery at once. But Bell said that three months or half a year might pass before the installation could be completed. And during that time, I knew, without good living-quarters we must perish. Bell and Jerry did their best to convince Harding of this necessity, but he remained sullen and unwilling.

Harding's disturbing change of manner seemed always more extreme. There was no visible physical difference in him—unless, as I sometimes thought, his pale blue eyes had turned a little darker. But something had totally changed his nature. Had I been superstitious enough to credit such a thing, I should have thought him literally *possessed*.

For many years he had been a close friend of mine. The long ruddy face beneath his untidy mass of yellowish hair was still unmistakably familiar. Yet sometimes, as I caught the new ruthless hardness in his eyes, I thought I looked upon a stranger.

He became increasingly dictatorial, quarrelsome, even vicious. He was savagely rude, even cruel, to young Tommy Veering. He cursed him, made rough jokes at his expense, ridiculed his youth and timidity. Twice I saw him knock Veering down, when they were at work together, with no excuse at all.

And the thin young engineer, through some quirk of dog-like meekness, accepted all Harding's offensiveness without any show of resentment. Indeed, so far as I could tell, he liked the big man all the better for this abuse. He kept Harding's company, and came to side with him in any argument.

What most distressed me about Hard-

ing, however, was his unkindness to Jerry. He developed a way of saying sharp cruel things to her, displaying a venomous malevolence that I had never suspected in him.

One day at table, for example, saying that his tea was cold, he flung it into Jerry's face, and began cursing her savagely. I should have hit him, then, but Jerry ran to me, wiping the scalding liquid out of her eyes, caught my arm, and begged me not to strike him.

THE rude dwelling finished at last, we unloaded Bell's equipment and carried it to the chosen site: a bare outcropping of living granite, just above the camp. Working beneath a canvas shelter —for, since the sun had gone, it was growing bitterly cold—we began drilling holes in the rock to anchor the legs of the tower.

As we cleared the crust of ice from this ledge, Tommy Veering made a curious discovery. In a crevice he found a number of tiny fossils: lichens, several small ancient spiders, two minute degenerative hymenopterous insects, and a small ammonite. The specimens were not so remarkable as their state of preservation. For every tiny limb and segment was intact, diamond-hard.

Veering showed the find to Harding, who became oddly excited over it.

"These are the original bodies!" he exclaimed, peering at them with a pocket miscoscope. "There has been no mineralizing, no substitution as in ordinary petrification. They have been just somehow—frozen!"

Mere heat, however, did not thaw them. The effort seemed sheerest folly—for the presence of the extinct mollusk alone was proof that the things had existed unchanged through geological ages —but Harding and Veering, in our rude little laboratory, made continual effort to revive the fossils.

"But they aren't fossils at all," Harding insisted. "There has been no change or deterioration since they were alive. The microscopic structure is perfect, every cell intact!"

His weeks of work only deepened the puzzle. It was about this time, incidentally, that he began to wear colored glasses, saying that the long hours at the microscope strained his eyes.

"The newer physics," he told me once, "would say that these creatures are in a space-time *stasis*. The spectroscope shows that the characteristics of space about their atoms has been altered, warped, so that no change or motion is possible—not even any time!"

Behind the dark lenses his eyes glittered with a strange excitement.

"If we could reverse that warping force, unlock the stasis, they would live again, unaware that even a second had passed." His voice was feverish, husky, terrible. "And that secret, if we learn it, will be a weapon greater than the Gorgon's head."

Frankly, I thought the project mere folly if not insane delusion, for I had increasing doubts of Harding's mental balance. But I did not discourage it, because it occupied his time and left him less troublesome.

The erection of Bell's automatic apparatus, meantime, went steadily forward. Veering proved himself a skilled and brilliant technician. By midwinter, it seemed, the battery might be in operation. All the ice would be thawed from the Basin, Bell promised, by the coming of the sun.

It is hard to give a true record of those weary, dragging months of winter night. The shadow of dire catastrophe had overhung us from the first. My old irrational conviction of approaching tragedy had

slowly deepened. Life in the Antarctic is a grim enough business at best, and Harding's increasingly evil nature made it, at times, almost insupportable.

But, aside from all that, there had been something else—something that Bell, and perhaps even Jerry, must have sensed more keenly than I.

When I say that the camp was haunted, it sounds like superstitious nonsense. Yet, almost from the day of our arrival, I had a curious, uneasy feeling that it was—that some strange intangible Presence hung about us, alertly watching every move we made, listening to every word we said.

Bell and Jerry, I think, were more conscious of it than I. For I often saw them silent, with cocked heads and strained intent faces, listening.

"It's nothing, Ron," Jerry said once, when I asked her what she listened for. Her tired face tried to smile. "I'm just nervous, I guess, worried about poor Aston. He has changed so, grown so much worse—have you noticed?"

And Bell, as we worked together about his tower, often paused to peer away across the ice. He laughed when I spoke about it, but his white face remained very grave.

"Just a feeling," he said, "that Something is watching us—trying to speak to us, perhaps." His thin frame abruptly shivered. "I've a queer feeling, Ron," he confessed, "that we shouldn't thaw the ice. I'm somehow afraid." His dark tortured eyes stared away again; his voice sank low. "Yes, afraid—of what we might uncover."

The warning of that singular dream came to me again. I felt an impulse to tell Bell about it, but checked my tongue. He was troubled enough already; I didn't want to increase his anxiety.

For still I believed it a dream. I dared not regard it as anything else. Sometimes I found myself staring northward, toward the Mountains of Uranus, wondering if the Seeker's purple pylon might indeed stand on some summit there. But I could never see it.

MARCH had gone, and most of April, when the thing happened that crystallized all my vague apprehensions and shattered the routine of our life at camp—that started the dread avalanche that did not end until all the world had been overwhelmed in horror.

The whole camp was asleep, after a long shift spent bolting together the sections of Bell's tower. I started suddenly awake, alarmed, yet not knowing what had roused me. For an instant I lay still, listening.

The wind, which had blown steadily for many days, had died. At first I could hear only a soft, weird rustling—the whisper of the aurora.

But suddenly, mingled with that eery sussuration, I caught another sound—a sound terribly familiar, and yet incredible: a thin far wailing, infinitely sweet and infinitely sad. It held all the heartbroken loneliness of the world, caught in slow eery minors, so faint they mocked the ears.

It was the piping of the Seeker of my dream. The voice of Maru-Mora! Or had I merely dreamed again? For it had ceased.

Breathless and trembling, uncertain that I had heard anything at all, I donned furs and hastened up out of our ice-burrow, into the polar night. The unutterable, appalling splendor of it caught me, held me for a moment motionless.

Complete calm had fallen. The air, curiously brilliant with frost, was absolutely still. The clear sky was purple-black, the southern constellations pale beyond the most brilliant auroral display I ever witnessed. Pure silver, crystal green

and living rose, its curved rays sprayed from beyond the pole. Its rustling, bannered hosts marched endlessly, whispering immemorial secrets of outer space.

With an effort I broke the aching thrall of its beauty. I stumbled up to the ledge beside Bell's unfinished tower, and peered away across the snow. It lay glittering and brilliant, dimly flushed with auroral color, drifts massed fantastically.

Painful as the ring of glass to a violin bow, I heard that sound again: an eery minor threnody, a resistless call of provocative promise.

And far away, beyond black grotesque hummocks of bare ice, I saw an incredible thing. Above the silver snow, plain in the aurora's radiance, it drifted. Flew —wingless! A tapered spiral, flaring upward. A woman's bust, golden-furred, cradled in its shimmering cup. An elfin woman's head, golden-crowned, proudly scarlet-crested. Slim golden arms that beckoned.

It was Maru-Mora, the Seeker of my dream!

And the dream, then, was real. The purple pylon did tower somewhere from the peaks beyond the ice. And lovely Karalee, to whom I had promised in the dream to return, must be living reality!

A cold tide of horror flowed suddenly over my soul; for the black Tharshoon, the scaled and monstrous Sleepers of the ice, must then be also real—and waiting to be wakened, if we should thaw the polar ice.

I had ignored the Seeker's warning, and Karalee's tearful appeal. What, now, was to be the penalty?

Maru-Mora's piping came again, alluring with its uncanny haunting sweetness, terrible with immemorial pain. The aurora flooded the sky again, and once more, far away, I glimpsed the alien beauty of the Seeker.

She flew low but swiftly, calling, golden arms beckoning. And beneath her, stumbling frantically after her, was—a man!

Caught in a queer paralysis of fascinated dread, I watched as he toiled up a slippery bank, tottered perilously along the brink of a blank crevasse. The shining alien siren fled away before him, mocking, elusive. He followed her over the flank of a gleaming drift. They both were gone.

It was a moment before I could recover myself, put down a sense of outraged unreality. Then I shouted, ran along the ledge toward the drift where they had vanished.

What the Seeker might be, dream or illusion, phantom or alien living being, I knew not—but I did know that only terrible death could await any man lured out across the ice. Was that her way to stop our work?

The aurora dimmed suddenly. In the starlit darkness I saw nothing beyond the drift. Thin echoes from the ice were the only answer to my calls. The eery song had ceased, the singer and her victim vanished.

Shivering, from the shock of eldritch horror as much from the bitter cold, I stumbled back to the camp. My shouts had roused the others. Jerry Harding, bewildered, anxious-eyed, met me as I came down into our burrow.

"What was it, Ron?" she whispered apprehensively. "What happened? I woke with the most dreadful feeling. And where is poor Merry?"

"Bell?" I gasped.

"He's gone from his bunk," she told me.

And I knew that it was Meriden Bell who had followed the Seeker across the snow.

You will not want to miss the thrilling chapters of this fascinating story in next month's WEIRD TALES. We suggest that you reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

The Shadow on the Screen

By HENRY KUTTNER

A weird story of Hollywood, and the grisly horror that cast its dreadful shadow across the silver screen as an incredible motion-picture was run off

TORTURE MASTER was being given a sneak preview at a Beverly Hills theatre. Somehow, when my credit line, "Directed by Peter Haviland," was flashed on the screen, a little chill of apprehension shook me, despite the applause that came from a receptive audience. When you've been in the picture game for a long time you get these hunches; I've often spotted a dud flicker before a hundred feet have been reeled off. Yet *Torture Master* was no worse than a dozen similar films I'd handled in the past few years.

But it was formula, box-office formula. I could see that. The star was all right; the make-up department had done a good job; the dialogue was unusually smooth. Yet the film was obviously box-office, and not the sort of film I'd have liked to direct.

After watching a reel unwind amid an encouraging scattering of applause, I got up and went to the lobby. Some of the gang from Summit Pictures were lounging there, smoking and commenting on the picture. Ann Howard, who played the heroine in *Torture Master,* noticed my scowl and pulled me into a corner. She was that rare type, a girl who will screen well without a lot of the yellow greasepaint that makes you look like an animated corpse. She was small, and her hair and eyes and skin were brown—I'd like to have seen her play *Peter Pan.* That type, you know.

I had occasionally proposed to her, but she never took me seriously. As a matter of fact, I myself didn't know how serious I was about it. Now she led me into the bar and ordered sidecars.

"Don't look so miserable, Pete," she said over the rim of her glass. "The picture's going over. It'll gross enough to suit the boss, and it won't hurt my reputation."

Well, that was right. Ann had a fat part, and she'd made the most of it. And the picture would be good box-office; Universal's *Night Key,* with Karloff, had been released a few months ago, and the audiences were ripe for another horror picture.

"I know," I told her, signaling the bartender to refill my glass. "But I get tired of these damn hokumy pics. Lord, how I'd like to do another *Cabinet of Doctor Caligari!*"

"Or another *Ape of God.*" Ann suggested.

I shrugged. "Even that, maybe. There's so much chance for development of the weird on the screen, Ann—and no producer will stand for a genuinely good picture of that type. They call it arty, and say it'll flop. If I branched out on my own—well, Hecht and MacArthur tried it, and they're back on the Hollywood payroll now."

Someone Ann knew came up and engaged her in conversation. I saw a man beckoning, and with a hasty apology left Ann to join him. It was Andy Worth, Hollywood's dirtiest columnist. I knew him for a double-crosser and a skunk, but I also knew that he could get more inside

information than a brace of Winchells. He was a short, fat chap with a meticulously cultivated mustache and sleeky pomaded black hair. Worth fancied himself as a ladies' man, and spent a great deal of his time trying to blackmail actresses into having affairs with him.

That didn't make him a villain, of course. I like anybody who can carry on an intelligent conversation for ten minutes, and Worth could do that. He fingered his mustache and said, "I heard you talking about *Ape of God*. A coincidence, Pete."

"Yeah?" I was cautious. I had to be, with this walking scandal-sheet. "How's that?"

He took a deep breath. "Well, you understand that I haven't got the real lowdown, and it's all hearsay—but I've found a picture that'll make the weirdest flicker ever canned look sick."

I suspected a gag. "Okay, what is it? *Torture Master?*"

"Eh? No — though Blake's yarn deserved better adaptation than your boys gave it. No, Pete, the one I'm talking about isn't for general release—isn't com-

"He was lifted through a welter of coiling, ropy tentacles."

pleted, in fact. I saw a few rushes of it. A one-man affair; title's *The Nameless.* Arnold Keene's doing it."

WORTH sat back and watched how I took that. And I must have shown my amazement. For it was Arnold Keene who had directed the notorious *Ape of God,* which had wrecked his promising career in films. The public doesn't know that picture. It never was released. Summit junked it. And they had good cause, although it was one of the most amazingly effective weird films I've ever seen. Keene had shot most of it down in Mexico, and he'd been able to assume virtual dictatorship of the location troupe. Several Mexicans had died at the time, and there had been some ugly rumors, but it had all been hushed up. I'd talked with several people who had been down near Taxco with Keene, and they spoke of the man with peculiar horror. He had been willing to sacrifice almost anything to make *Ape of God* a masterpiece of its type.

It was an unusual picture—there was no question about that. There's only one master print of the film, and it's kept in a locked vault at Summit. Very few have seen it. For what Machen had done in weird literature, Keene had done on the screen—and it was literally amazing.

I said to Worth, "Arnold Keene, eh? I've always had a sneaking sympathy for the man. But I thought he'd died long ago."

"Oh, no. He bought a place near Tujunga and went into hiding. He didn't have much dough after the blow-up, you know, and it took him about five years to get together enough *dinero* to start his *Nameless.* He always said *Ape of God* was a failure, and that he intended to do a film that would be a masterpiece of weirdness. Well, he's done it. He's canned a film that's—unearthly. I tell you it made my flesh creep."

"Who's the star?" I asked.

"Unknowns. Russian trick, you know. The real star is a—a shadow."

I stared at him.

"That's right, Pete. The shadow of something that's never shown on the screen. Doesn't sound like much, eh? But you ought to see it!"

"I'd like to," I told him. "In fact, I'll do just that. Maybe he'll release it through Summit."

Worth chuckled. "No chance. No studio would release that flicker. I'm not even going to play it up in my dirt sheet. This is the real McCoy, Pete."

"What's Keene's address?" I asked.

Worth gave it to me. "But don't go out till Wednesday night," he said. "The rough prints 'll be ready then, or most of them. And keep it under you hat, of course."

A group of autograph hunters came up just then, and Worth and I were separated. It didn't matter. I'd got all the information I needed. My mind was seething with fantastic surmises. Keene was one of the great geniuses of the screen, and his talent lay in the direction of the macabre. Unlike book publishers, the studios catered to no small, discriminating audiences. A film must suit everybody.

Finally I broke away and took Ann to a dance at Bel-Air. But I hadn't forgotten Keene, and the next night I was too impatient to wait. I telephoned Worth, but he was out. Oddly enough, I was unable to get in touch with him during the next few days; even his paper couldn't help me. A furious editor told me the Associated Press had been sending him hourly telegrams asking for Worth's copy; but the man had vanished completely. I had a hunch.

It was Tuesday night when I drove out of the studio and took a short cut through Griffith Park, past the Planetarium, to Glendale. From there I went on to Tujunga, to the address Worth had given me. Once or twice I had an uneasy suspicion that a black coupé was trailing me, but I couldn't be sure.

Arnold Keene's house was in a little canyon hidden back in the Tujunga mountains. I had to follow a winding dirt road for several miles, and ford a stream or two, before I reached it. The place was built against the side of the canyon, and a man stood on the porch and watched me as I braked my car to a stop.

It was Arnold Keene. I recognized him immediately. He was a slender man under middle height, with a closely cropped bristle of gray hair; his face was coldly austere. There had been a rumor that Keene had at one time been an officer in Prussia before he came to Hollywood and Americanized his name, and, scrutinizing him, I could well believe it. His eyes were like pale blue marbles, curiously shallow.

He said, "Peter Haviland? I did not expect you until tomorrow night."

I shook hands. "Sorry if I intrude," I apologized. "The fact is, I got impatient after what Worth told me about your film. He isn't here, by any chance?"

The shallow eyes were unreadable. "No. But come in. Luckily, the developing took less time than I had anticipated. I need only a few more shots to complete my task."

He ushered me into the house, which was thoroughly modern and comfortably furnished. Under the influence of good cognac my suspicions began to dissolve. I told Keene I had always admired his *Ape of God*.

He made a wry grimace. "Amateurish, Haviland. I depended too much on hokum in that film. Merely devil-worship, a reincarnated Gilles de Rais, and sadism. That isn't true weirdness."

I was interested. "That's correct. But the film had genuine power——"

"Man has nothing of the weird in him intrinsically. It is only the hints of the utterly abnormal and unhuman that give one the true feeling of weirdness. That, and human reactions to such supernatural phenomena. Look at any great weird work—*The Horla*, which tells of a man's reaction to a creature utterly alien, Blackwood's *Willows*, Machen's *Black Seal*, Lovecraft's *Color Out of Space*—all these deal with the absolutely alien influencing normal lives. Sadism and death may contribute, but alone they cannot produce the true, intangible atmosphere of weirdness."

I had read all these tales. "But you can't film the indescribable. How could you show the invisible beings of *The Willows?*"

Keene hesitated. "I think I'll let my film answer that. I have a projection room downstairs——"

The bell rang sharply. I could not help noticing the quick glance Keene darted at me. With an apologetic gesture he went out and presently returned with Ann Howard at his side. She was smiling rather shakily.

"Did you forget our date, Pete?" she asked me.

I blinked, and suddenly remembered. Two weeks ago I had promised to take Ann to an affair in Laguna Beach this evening, but in my preoccupation with Keene's picture the date had slipped my mind. I stammered apologies.

"Oh, that's all right," she broke in. "I'd much rather stay here—that is, if Mr. Keene doesn't mind. His picture——"

"You know about it?"

"I told her," Keene said. "When she explained why she had come, I took the liberty of inviting her to stay to watch the

film. I did not want her to drag you away, you see," he finished, smiling. "Some cognac for Miss—eh?"

I introduced them.

"For Miss Howard, and then *The Nameless.*"

At his words a tiny warning note seemed to throb in my brain. I had been fingering a heavy metal paperweight, and now, as Keene's attention was momentarily diverted to the sideboard, I slipped it, on a sudden impulse, into my pocket. It would be no defense, though, against a gun.

What was wrong with me, I wondered? An atmosphere of distrust and suspicion seemed to have sprung out of nothing. As Keene ushered us down into his projection room, the skin of my back seemed to crawl with the expectation of attack. It was inexplicable, but definitely unpleasant.

KEENE was busy for a time in the projection booth, and then he joined us.

"Modern machinery is a blessing," he said with heavy jocularity. "I can be as lazy as I wish. I needed no help with the shooting, once the automatic cameras were installed. The projector, too, is automatic."

I felt Ann move closer to me in the gloom. I put my arm around her and said, "It helps, yes. What about releasing the picture, Mr. Keene?"

There was a harsh note in his voice. "It will not be released. The world is uneducated, not ready for it. In a hundred years, perhaps, it will achieve the fame it deserves. I am doing it for posterity, and for the sake of creating a weird masterpiece on the screen."

With a muffled click the projector began to operate, and a title flashed on the screen: *The Nameless.*

Keene's voice came out of the darkness. "It's a silent film, except for one sequence at the start. Sound adds nothing to weirdness, and it helps to destroy the illusion of reality. Later, suitable music will be dubbed in."

I did not answer. For a book had flashed on the gray oblong before us—that amazing tour de force, *The Circus of Doctor Lao.* A hand opened it, and a long finger followed the lines as a toneless voice read:

"These are the sports, the offthrows of the universe instead of the species; these are the weird children of the lust of the spheres. Mysticism explains them where science cannot. Listen: when that great mysterious fecundity that peopled the worlds at the command of the gods had done with its birth-giving, when the celestial midwives all had left, when life had begun in the universe, the primal womb-thing found itself still unexhausted, its loins still potent. So that awful fertility tossed on its couch in a final fierce outbreak of life-giving and gave birth to these nightmare beings, these abortions of the world."

The voice ceased. The book faded, and there swam into view a mass of tumbled ruins. The ages had pitted the man-carved rocks with cracks and scars; the bas-relief figures were scarcely recognizable. I was reminded of certain ruins I had seen in Yucatan.

The camera swung down. The ruins seemed to grow larger. A yawning hole gaped in the earth.

Beside me Keene said, "The site of a ruined temple. Watch, now."

The effect was that of moving forward into the depths of a subterranean pit. For a moment the screen was in darkness; then a stray beam of sunlight rested on an idol that stood in what was apparently an underground cavern. A narrow crack of light showed in the roof. The idol was starkly hideous.

I got only a flashing glimpse, but the

impression on my mind was that of a bulky, ovoid shape like a pineapple or a pine-cone. The thing had certain doubtful features which lent it a definitely unpleasant appearance; but it was gone in a flash, dissolving into a brightly lighted drawing-room, thronged with gay couples.

The story proper began at that point. None of the actors or actresses was known to me; Keene must have hired them and worked secretly in his house. Most of the interiors and a few of the exteriors seemed to have been taken in this very canyon. The director had used the "parallel" trick which saves so much money for studios yearly. I'd often done it myself. It simply means that the story is tied in with real life as closely as possible; that is, when I had a troupe working up at Lake Arrowhead last winter, and an unexpected snowfall changed the scene, I had the continuity rewritten so that the necessary scenes could take place in snow. Similarly, Keene had paralleled his own experiences—sometimes almost too closely.

The Nameless told of a man, ostracized by his fellows because of his fanatical passion for the morbid and bizarre, who determined to create a work of art —a living masterpiece of sheer weirdness. He had experimented before by directing films that were sufficiently unusual to stir up considerable comment. But this did not satisfy him. It was acting—and he wanted something more than that. No one can convincingly fake reaction to horror, not even the most talented actor, he contended. The genuine emotion must be felt in order to be transferred to the screen.

It was here that *The Nameless* ceased to parallel Keene's own experiences, and branched out into sheer fantasy. The protagonist in the film was Keene himself, but this was not unusual, as directors often act in their own productions. And, by deft montage shots, the audience learned that Keene in his search for authenticity had gone down into Mexico, and had, with the aid of an ancient scroll, found the site of a ruined Aztec temple. And here, as I say, reality was left behind as the film entered a morbid and extraordinary phase.

THERE was a god hidden beneath this ruined temple — a long-forgotten god, which had been worshipped even before the Aztecs had sprung from the womb of the centuries. At least, the natives had considered it a god, and had erected a temple in its honor, but Keene hinted that the thing was actually a survival, one of the "offthrows of the universe," unique and baroque, which had come down through the eons in an existence totally alien to mankind. The creature was never actually seen on the screen, save for a few brief glimpses in the shadowed, underground temple. It was roughly barrel-shaped, and perhaps ten feet high, studded with odd spiky projections. The chief feature was a gem set in the thing's rounded apex—a smoothly polished jewel as large as a child's head. It was in this gem that the being's life was supposed to have its focus.

It was not dead, but neither was it alive, in the accepted sense of that term. When the Aztecs had filled the temple with the hot stench of blood the thing had lived, and the jewel had flamed with unearthly radiance. But with the passage of time the sacrifices had ceased, and the being had sunk into a state of coma akin to hibernation. In the picture Keene brought it to life.

He transported it secretly to his home, and there, in an underground room hollowed beneath the house, he placed the monster-god. The room was built with an eye for the purpose for which Keene intended it; automatic cameras and clever

lighting features were installed, so that pictures could be shot from several different angles at once, and pieced together later as Keene cut the film. And now there entered something of the touch of genius which had made Keene famous.

He was clever, I had always realized that. Yet in the scenes that were next unfolded I admired not so much the technical tricks — which were familiar enough to me—as the marvelously clever way in which Keene had managed to inject realism into the acting. His characters did not act—they *lived*.

Or, rather, they died. For in the picture they were thrust into the underground room to die horribly as sacrifices to the monster-god from the Aztec temple. Sacrifice was supposed to bring the thing to life, to cause the jewel in which its existence was bound to flare with fantastic splendor. The first sacrifice was, I think, the most effective.

The underground room in which the god was hidden was large, but quite vacant, save for a curtained alcove which held the idol. A barred doorway led to the upper room, and here Keene appeared on the screen, revolver in hand, herding before him a man—overall-clad, with a stubble of black beard on his stolid face. Keene swung open the door, motioned his captive into the great room. He closed the barred door, and through the grating could be seen busy at a switchboard.

Light flared. The man stood near the bars, and then, at Keene's gesture with his weapon, moved forward slowly to the far wall. He stood there, staring around vaguely, dull apprehension in his face. Light threw his shadow in bold relief on the wall.

Then another shadow leaped into existence beside him.

It was barrel-shaped, gigantic, studded with blunt spikes, and capped by a round dark blob—the life-jewel. The shadow of the monster god! The man saw it. He turned.

Stark horror sprang into his face, and at sight of that utterly ghastly and realistic expression a chill struck through me. This was almost too convincing. The man could not be merely acting.

But, if he was, his acting was superb, and so was Keene's direction. The shadow on the wall stirred, and a thrill of movement shook it. It rocked and seemed to rise, supported by a dozen tentacular appendages that uncoiled from beneath its base. The spikes—changed. They lengthened. They coiled and writhed, hideously worm-like.

It wasn't the metamorphosis of the shadow that held me motionless in my chair. Rather, it was the appalling expression of sheer horror on the man's face. He stood gaping as the shadow toppled and swayed on the wall, growing larger and larger. Then he fled, his mouth an open square of terror. The shadow paused, with an odd air of indecision, and slipped slowly along the wall out of range of the camera.

But there were other cameras, and Keene had used his cutting-shears deftly. The movements of the man were mirrored on the screen; the glaring lights swung and flared; and ever the grim shadow crawled hideously across the wall. The thing that cast it was never shown—just the shadow, and it was a dramatically effective trick. Too many directors, I knew, could not have resisted the temptation to show the monster, thus destroying the illusion—for papier-maché and rubber, no matter how cleverly constructed, cannot convincingly ape reality.

At last the shadows merged—the gigantic swaying thing with its coiling tentacles, and the black shadow of the man that was caught and lifted, struggling and kicking frantically. The shadows merged—and the man did not reappear.

Only the dark blob capping the great shadow faded and flickered, as though strange light were streaming from it; the light that was fed by sacrifice, the jewel that was—life.

BESIDE me there came a rustle. I felt Ann stir and move closer in the gloom. Keene's voice came from some distance away.

"There were several more sacrifice scenes, Haviland, but I haven't patched them in yet, except for the one you'll see in a moment now. As I said, the film isn't finished."

I did not answer. My eyes were on the screen as the fantastic tale unfolded. The pictured Keene was bringing another victim to his cavern, a short, fat man with sleekly pomaded black hair. I did not see his face until he had been imprisoned in the cave, and then, abruptly, there came a close-up shot, probably done with a telescopic lens. His plump face, with its tiny mustache, leaped into gigantic visibility, and I recognized Andy Worth.

It was the missing columnist, but for the first time I saw his veneer of sophistication lacking. Naked fear crawled in his eyes, and I leaned forward in my seat as the ghastly barrel-shaped shadow sprang out on the wall. Worth saw it, and the expression on his face was shocking. I pushed back my chair and got up as the lights came on. The screen went blank.

Arnold Keene was staanding by the door, erect and military as ever. He had a gun in his hand, and its muzzle was aimed at my stomach.

"You had better sit down, Haviland," he said quietly. "You too, Miss Howard. I've something to tell you—and I don't wish to be melodramatic about it. This gun"—he glanced at it wryly—"is necessary. There are a few things you must know, Haviland, for a reason you'll understand later."

I said, "There'll be some visitors here for you soon, Keene. You don't think I'd neglect normal precautions!"

He shrugged. "You're lying, of course. Also you're unarmed, or you'd have had your gun out by now. I didn't expect you until tomorrow night, but I'm prepared. In a word, what I have to tell you is this: the film you just saw is a record of actual events."

Ann's teeth sank into her lip, but I didn't say anything. I waited, and Keene resumed.

"Whether you believe me or not doesn't matter, for you'll have to believe in a few minutes. I told you something of my motive, my desire to create a genuine masterpiece of weirdness. That's what I've done, or will have done before tomorrow. Quite a number of vagrants and laborers have disappeared, and the columnist, Worth, as well; but I took care to leave no clues. You'll be the last to vanish—you and this girl."

"You'll never be able to show the film," I told him.

"What of it? You're a hack, Haviland, and you can't understand what it means to create a masterpiece. Is a work of art any less beautiful because it's hidden? I'll see the picture—and after I'm dead the world will see it, and realize my genius even though they may fear and hate its expression. The reactions of my unwilling actors—that's the trick. As a director, you should know that there's no substitute for realism. The reactions were not faked — that was obvious enough. The first sacrifice was that of a clod—an unintelligent moron, whose fears were largely superstitious. The next sacrifice was of a higher type—a vagrant who came begging to my door some months ago. You will complete the group, for you'll know just what you're facing, and

your attempt to rationalize your fear will lend an interesting touch. Both of you will stand up, with your hands in the air, and precede me into this passage."

All this came out tonelessly and swiftly, quite as though it were a rehearsed speech. His hand slid over the wall beside him, and a black oblong widened in the oak paneling. I stood up.

"Do as he says, Ann," I said. "Maybe I can——"

"No, you can't," Keene interrupted, gesturing impatiently with his weapon. "You won't have the chance. Hurry up."

We went through the opening in the wall and Keene followed, touching a stud that flooded the passage with light. It was a narrow tunnel that slanted down through solid rock for perhaps ten feet to a steep stairway. He herded us down this, after sliding the panel shut.

"It's well hidden," he said, indicating metal sheathing—indeed, the entire corridor was lined with metal plates. "This lever opens it from within, but no one but me can find the spring which opens it from without. The police could wreck the house without discovering this passage."

That seemed worth remembering, but of little practical value at the moment. Ann and I went down the stairway until it ended in another short passage. Our way was blocked by a door of steel bars, which Keene unlocked with a key he took from his pocket. The passage where we stood was dimly lighted; there were several chairs here; and the space beyond the barred door was not lighted at all.

KEENE opened the door and gestured me through it. He locked it behind me and turned to Ann. Her face, I saw, was paper-white in the pale glow.

What happened after that brought an angry curse to my lips. Without warning Keene swung the automatic in a short, vicious arc, smashing it against Ann's head.

She saw it coming too late, and her upflung hand failed to ward off the blow. She dropped without a sound, a little trickle of blood oozing from her temple. Keene stepped over her body to a switchboard set in the rock wall.

Light lanced with intolerable brilliance into my eyes. I shut them tightly, opening them after a moment to stare around apprehensively. I recognized my surroundings. I was in the cave of sacrifice, the underground den I had seen on the screen. Cameras high up on the walls began to operate as I discovered them. From various points blinding arc-lights streamed down upon me.

A gray curtain shielded a space on the far wall, but this was drawn upward to reveal a deep alcove. There was an object within that niche—a barrel-shaped thing ten feet high, studded with spikes, and crowned with a jewel that pulsed and glittered with cold flame. It was gray and varnished-looking, and it was the original of Keene's Aztec god.

Somehow I felt oddly reassured as I examined the thing. It was a model, of course, inanimate and dead; for certainly no life of any kind could exist in such an abnormality. Keene might have installed machinery of some sort within it, however.

"You see, Haviland," Keene said from beyond the bars, "the thing actually exists. I got on the trail of it in an old parchment I found in the Huntington Library. It had been considered merely an interesting bit of folk-lore, but I saw something else in it. When I was making *Ape of God* in Mexico I discovered the ruined temple, and what lay forgotten behind the altar."

He touched a switch, and light streamed out from the alcove behind the thing. Swiftly I turned. On the wall be-

hind me was my own shadow, grotesquely elongated, and beside it was the squat, amorphous patch of blackness I had seen on the screen upstairs.

My back was toward Keene, and my fingers crept into my pocket, touching the metal paperweight I had dropped there earlier that evening. Briefly I considered the possibility of hurling the thing at Keene, and then decided against it. The bars were too close together, and the man would shoot me at any sign of dangerous hostility.

My eyes were drawn to the shadow on the wall. It was moving.

It rocked slightly, and lifted. The spikes lengthened. The thing was no longer inanimate and dead, and as I swung about, stark amazement gripping me, I saw the incredible metamorphosis that had taken place in the thing that cast the shadow.

It was no longer barrel-shaped. A dozen smooth, glistening appendages, ending in flat pads, supported the snake-thin body. And all over that grayish upright pole tentacles sprouted and lengthened, writhing into ghastly life as the horror awakened. Keene had not lied, and the monstrous survival he had brought from the Aztec temple was lumbering from the alcove, its myriad tentacles alive with frightful hunger!

Keene saved me. He saw me standing motionless with abysmal fear in the path of that gigantic, nightmare being, and realizing that he was being cheated of his picture, the man shouted at me to run. His hoarse voice broke the spell that held me unmoving, and I whirled and fled across the cave to the barred door. Skin ripped from my hands as I tore at the bars.

"Run!" Keene yelled at me, his shallow eyes blazing. "It can't move fast! Look out——"

A writhing, snake-like thing lashed out, and a sickening musky stench filled my nostrils. I leaped away, racing across the cave again. The arc-lights died and others flared into being as Keene manipulated the switchboard. He was adjusting the lights, so that our shadows would not be lost—so that in the climax of *The Nameless* the shadow of that ghastly horror would be thrown on the cave wall beside me.

It was an infernal game of tag we played there, in those shifting lights that glared down while the camera lenses watched dispassionately. I fled and dodged with my pulses thundering and blood pounding in my temples, and ever the grim shadow moved slowly across the walls, while my legs began to ache with the strain. For hours, perhaps, or eons, I fled.

There would come brief periods of respite when I would cling to the bars, cursing Keene, but he would not answer. His hands flickered over the switchboard as he adjusted the arc-lights, and his eyes never paused in their roving examination of the cave. In the end it was this that saved me.

For Keene did not see Ann stir and open her eyes. He did not see the girl, after a swift glance around, get quietly to her feet. Luckily she was behind Keene, and he did not turn.

I tried to keep my eyes away from Ann, but I do not think I succeeded. At the last moment I saw Keene's face change, and he started back; but the chair in Ann's hands crashed down and splintered on the man's head. He fell to his knees, clawing at the air, and then collapsed inertly.

I was on the far side of the cave, and my attention was momentarily diverted from the monster. I had been watching it from the corner of my eye, expecting to be able to dodge and leap away before

it came too close; but it lumbered forward with a sudden burst of speed. Although I tried to spring clear I failed; a tentacle whipped about my legs and sent me sprawling. As I tried to roll away another smooth gray coil got my left arm.

Intolerable agony dug into my shoulder as I was lifted. I heard Ann scream, and a gun barked angrily. Bullets plopped into the smooth flesh of the monster, but it paid no attention. I was lifted through a welter of coiling, ropy tentacles, until just above me was the flaming jewel in which the creature's life was centered.

Remembrance of Keene's words spurred me to action; this might be the monster's vulnerable point. The paperweight was still in my pocket, and I clawed it out desperately. I hurled it with all my strength at the shining gem. And the jewel shattered!

There came a shrill vibration, like the tinkling of countless tiny crystalline bells. Piercingly sweet, it shrilled in my ears, and died away quickly. And suddenly nothing existed but light.

It was as though the shattering of the gem had released a sea of incandescent flame imprisoned within it. The glare of the arc-lights faded beside this flood of silvery radiance that bathed me. The cold glory of Arcturus, the blaze of tropical moonlight, were in the light.

Swiftly it faded and fled away. I felt myself dropping, and pain lanced into my wrenched shoulder as I struck the ground. I heard Ann's voice.

Dazedly I got up, expecting to see the monster towering above me. But it was gone. In its place, a few feet away, was the barrel-shaped thing I had first seen in the alcove. There was a gaping cavity in the rounded apex where the jewel had been. And, somehow, I sensed that the creature was no longer deadly, no longer a horror.

I saw Ann. She was still holding Keene's gun, and in her other hand was the key with which she had unlocked the door. She came running toward me, and I went swiftly to meet her.

I took the gun and made sure it was loaded. "Come on," I said, curtly. "We're getting out of here."

ANN's fingers were gripping my arm tightly as we went through the door, past the prone figure of Keene, and up the stairway. The lever behind the panel was not difficult to operate, and I followed Ann through the opening into the theater. Then I paused, listening.

Ann turned, watching me, a question in her eyes. "What is it, Pete?"

"Listen," I said. "Get the cans of film from the projection booth. We'll take them with us and burn them."

"But—you're not——"

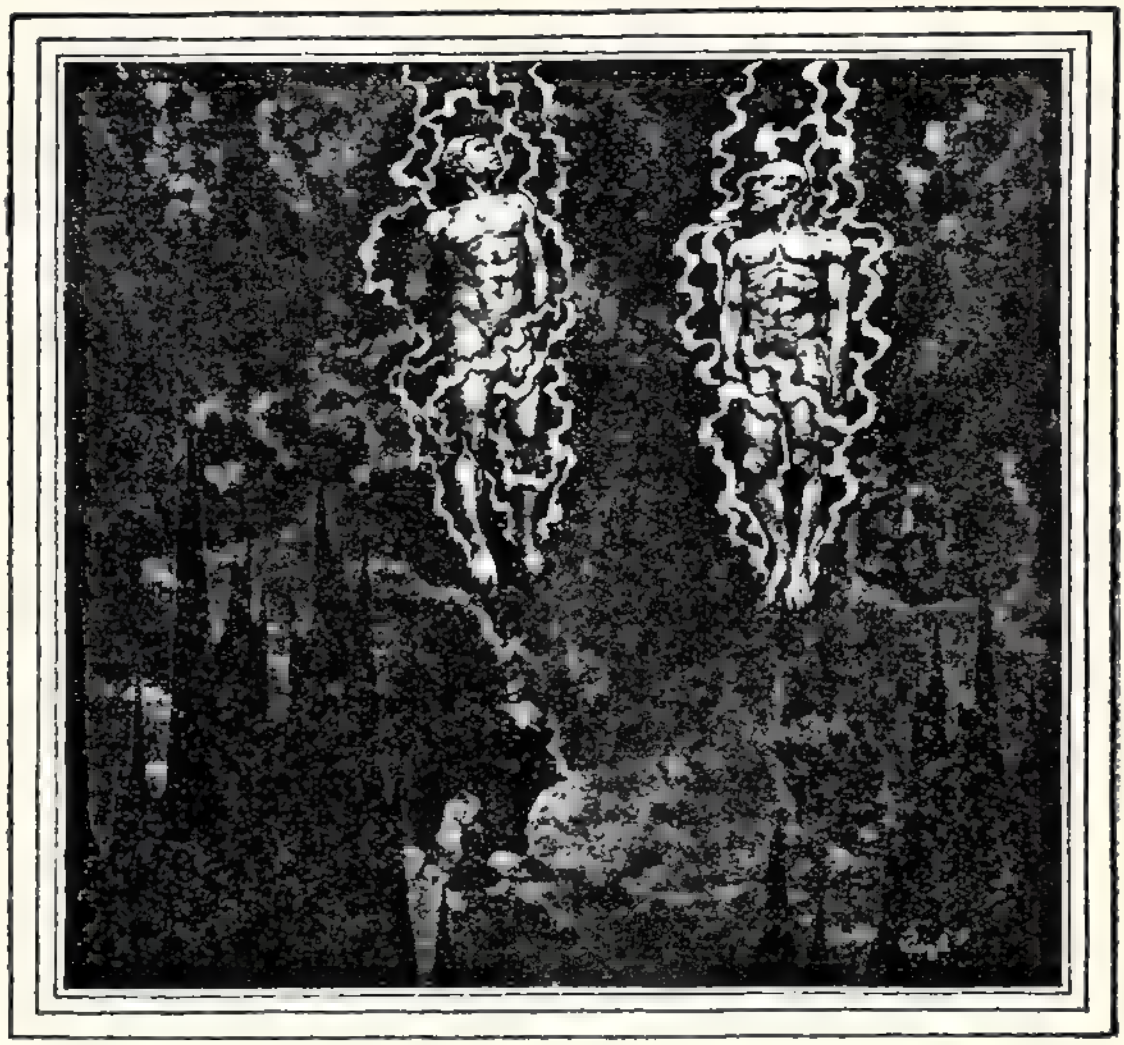
"I'll be with you in a minute," I told her, and swung the panel shut.

I went down the stairs swiftly and very quietly, my gun ready and my ears alert for the low muttering I had heard from below.

Keene was no longer unconscious. He was standing beside the switchboard with his back to me, and over his shoulder I could see the shadow of the monster-god sprawling on the wall, inert and lifeless. Keene was chanting something, in a language I did not know, and his hands were moving in strange gestures.

God knows what unearthly powers Keene had acquired in his search for horror! For as I stood there, watching the patch of blackness on the cave wall, I saw a little shudder rock that barrel-shaped shadow of horror, while a single spike abruptly lengthened into a tentacle that groped out furtively and drew back and vanished.

Then I killed Arnold Keene.



"We shall meet again, perhaps in the shining mists of Orion's Sword."

Beyond the Wall of Sleep

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

What strange, splendid yet terrible experiences came to the poor mountaineer in the hours of sleep?—a story of a supernal being from Algol, the Demon-Star

I HAVE often wondered if the majority of mankind ever pause to reflect upon the occasionally titanic significance of dreams, and of the obscure world to which they belong. Whilst the greater number of our nocturnal visions are perhaps no more than faint and fantastic reflections of our waking experiences—Freud to the contrary with his puerile symbolism—there are still a cer-

tain remainder whose immundane and ethereal character permits of no ordinary interpretation, and whose vaguely exciting and disquieting effect suggests possible minute glimpses into a sphere of mental existence no less important than physical life, yet separated from that life by an all but impassable barrier. From my experience I cannot doubt but that man, when lost to terrestrial consciousness, is indeed sojourning in another and uncorporeal life of far different nature from the life we know, and of which only the slightest and most indistinct memories linger after waking. From those blurred and fragmentary memories we may infer much, yet prove little. We may guess that in dreams life, matter, and vitality, as the earth knows such things, are not necessarily constant; and that time and space do not exist as our waking selves comprehend them. Sometimes I believe that this less material life is our truer life, and that our vain presence on the terraqueous globe is itself the secondary or merely virtual phenomenon.

It was from a youthful revery filled with speculations of this sort that I arose one afternoon in the winter of 1900-01, when to the state psychopathic institution in which I served as an interne was brought the man whose case has ever since haunted me so unceasingly. His name, as given on the records, was Joe Slater, or Slaader, and his appearance was that of the typical denizen of the Catskill Mountain region; one of those strange, repellent scions of a primitive Colonial peasant stock whose isolation for nearly three centuries in the hilly fastnesses of a little-traveled countryside has caused them to sink to a kind of barbaric degeneracy, rather than advance with their more fortunately placed brethren of the thickly settled districts. Among these odd folk, who correspond exactly to the decadent element of "white trash" in the South, law and morals are non-existent; and their general mental status is probably below that of any other section of the native American people.

Joe Slater, who came to the institution in the vigilant custody of four state policemen, and who was described as a highly dangerous character, certainly presented no evidence of his perilous disposition when I first beheld him. Though well above the middle stature, and of somewhat brawny frame, he was given an absurd appearance of harmless stupidity by the pale, sleepy blueness of his small watery eyes, the scantiness of his neglected and never-shaven growth of yellow beard, and the listless drooping of his heavy nether lip. His age was unknown, since among his kind neither family records nor permanent family ties exist; but from the baldness of his head in front, and from the decayed condition of his teeth, the head surgeon wrote him down as a man of about forty.

From the medical and court documents we learned all that could be gathered of his case: This man, a vagabond, hunter and trapper, had always been strange in the eyes of his primitive associates. He had habitually slept at night beyond the ordinary time, and upon waking would often talk of unknown things in a manner so bizarre as to inspire fear even in the hearts of an unimaginative populace. Not that his form of language was at all unusual, for he never spoke save in the debased patois of his environment; but the tone and tenor of his utterances were of such mysterious wildness, that none might listen without apprehension. He himself was generally as terrified and baffled as his auditors, and within an hour after awakening would forget all that he had said, or at least all that had caused him to say what he did; relapsing into a bovine, half-amiable normality like that of the other hill-dwellers.

As Slater grew older, it appeared, his matutinal aberrations had gradually increased in frequency and violence; till about a month before his arrival at the institution had occurred the shocking tragedy which caused his arrest by the authorities. One day near noon, after a profound sleep begun in a whisky debauch at about five of the previous afternoon, the man had roused himself most suddenly, with ululations so horrible and unearthly that they brought several neighbors to his cabin—a filthy sty where he dwelt with a family as indescribable as himself. Rushing out into the snow, he had flung his arms aloft and commenced a series of leaps directly upward in the air; the while shouting his determination to reach some "big, big cabin with brightness in the roof and walls and floor and the loud queer music far away." As two men of moderate size sought to restrain him, he had struggled with maniacal force and fury, screaming of his desire and need to find and kill a certain "thing that shines and shakes and laughs." At length, after temporarily felling one of his detainers with a sudden blow, he had flung himself upon the other in a demoniac ecstasy of blood-thirstiness, shrieking fiendishly that he would "jump high in the air and burn his way through anything that stopped him."

Family and neighbors had now fled in a panic, and when the more courageous of them returned, Slater was gone, leaving behind an unrecognizable pulp-like thing that had been a living man but an hour before. None of the mountaineers had dared to pursue him, and it is likely that they would have welcomed his death from the cold; but when several mornings later they heard his screams from a distant ravine they realized that he had somehow managed to survive, and that his removal in one way or another would be necessary. Then had followed an armed searching-party, whose purpose (whatever it may have been originally) became that of a sheriff's posse after one of the seldom popular state troopers had by accident observed, then questioned, and finally joined the seekers.

On the third day Slater was found unconscious in the hollow of a tree, and taken to the nearest jail, where alienists from Albany examined him as soon as his senses returned. To them he told a simple story. He had, he said, gone to sleep one afternoon about sundown after drinking much liquor. He had awaked to find himself standing bloody-handed in the snow before his cabin, the mangled corpse of his neighbor Peter Slader at his feet. Horrified, he had taken to the woods in a vague effort to escape from the scene of what must have been his crime. Beyond these things he seemed to know nothing, nor could the expert questioning of his interrogators bring out a single additional fact.

That night Slater slept quietly, and the next morning he wakened with no singular feature save a certain alteration of expression. Doctor Barnard, who had been watching the patient, thought he noticed in the pale blue eyes a certain gleam of peculiar quality, and in the flaccid lips an all but imperceptible tightening, as if of intelligent determination. But when questioned, Slater relapsed into the habitual vacancy of the mountaineer, and only reiterated what he had said on the preceding day.

On the third morning occurred the first of the man's mental attacks. After some show of uneasiness in sleep, he burst forth into a frenzy so powerful that the combined efforts of four men were needed to bind him in a straitjacket. The alienists listened with keen attention to his words, since their curiosity had been aroused to a high pitch by the suggestive

yet mostly conflicting and incoherent stories of his family and neighbors. Slater raved for upward of fifteen minutes, babbling in his backwoods dialect of green edifices of light, oceans of space, strange music, and shadowy mountains and valleys. But most of all did he dwell upon some mysterious blazing entity that shook and laughed and mocked at him. This vast, vague personality seemed to have done him a terrible wrong, and to kill it in triumphant revenge was his paramount desire. In order to reach it, he said, he would soar through abysses of emptiness, *burning* every obstacle that stood in his way. Thus ran his discourse, until with the greatest suddenness he ceased. The fire of madness died from his eyes, and in dull wonder he looked at his questioners and asked why he was bound. R. Barnard unbuckled the leather harness and did not restore it till night, when he succeeded in persuading Slater to don it of his own volition, for his own good. The man had now admitted that he sometimes talked queerly, though he knew not why.

Within a week two more attacks appeared, but from them the doctors learned little. On the *source* of Slater's visions they speculated at length, for since he could neither read nor write, and had apparently never heard a legend or fairy-tale, his gorgeous imagery was quite inexplicable. That it could not come from any known myth or romance was made especially clear by the fact that the unfortunate lunatic expressed himself only in his own simple manner. He raved of things he did not understand and could not interpret; things which he claimed to have experienced, but which he could not have learned through any normal or connected narration. The alienists soon agreed that abnormal dreams were the foundation of the trouble; dreams whose vividness could for a time completely dominate the waking mind of this basically inferior man. With due formality Slater was tried for murder, acquitted on the ground of insanity, and committed to the institution wherein I held so humble a post.

I HAVE said that I am a constant speculator concerning dream-life, and from this you may judge of the eagerness with which I applied myself to the study of the new patient as soon as I had fully ascertained the facts of his case. He seemed to sense a certain friendliness in me, born no doubt of the interest I could not conceal, and the gentle manner in which I questioned him. Not that he ever recognized me during his attacks, when I hung breathlessly upon his chaotic but cosmic word-pictures; but he knew me in his quiet hours, when he would sit by his barred window weaving baskets of straw and willow, and perhaps pining for the mountain freedom he could never again enjoy. His family never called to see him; probably it had found another temporary head, after the manner of decadent mountain folk.

By degrees I commenced to feel an overwhelming wonder at the mad and fantastic conceptions of Joe Slater. The man himself was pitiably inferior in mentality and language alike; but his glowing, titanic visions, though described in a barbarous disjointed jargon, were assuredly things which only a superior or even exceptional brain could conceive. How, I often asked myself, could the stolid imagination of a Catskill degenerate conjure up sights whose very possession argued a lurking spark of genius? How could any backwoods dullard have gained so much as an idea of those glittering realms of supernal radiance and space about which Slater ranted in his furious delirium? More and more I inclined to the belief that in the pitiful personality who cringed before me lay the disordered

nucleus of something beyond my comprehension; something infinitely beyond the comprehension of my more experienced but less imaginative medical and scientific colleagues.

And yet I could extract nothing definite from the man. The sum of all my investigation was, that in a kind of semi-corporeal dream-life Slater wandered or floated through resplendent and prodigious valleys, meadows, gardens, cities, and palaces of light, in a region unbounded and unknown to man; that there he was no peasant or degenerate, but a creature of importance and vivid life, moving proudly and dominantly, and checked only by a certain deadly enemy, who seemed to be a being of visible yet ethereal structure, and who did not appear to be of human shape, since Slater never referred to it as a *man*, or as aught save a *thing*. This *thing* had done Slater some hideous but unnamed wrong, which the maniac (if maniac he were) yearned to avenge.

From the manner in which Slater alluded to their dealings, I judged that he and the luminous *thing* had met on equal terms; that in his dream existence the man was himself a luminous *thing* of the same race as his enemy. This impression was sustained by his frequent references to *flying through space* and *burning* all that impeded his progress. Yet these conceptions were formulated in rustic words wholly inadequate to convey them, a circumstance which drove me to the conclusion that if a true dream world indeed existed, oral language was not its medium for the transmission of thought. Could it be that the dream soul inhabiting this inferior body was desperately struggling to speak things which the simple and halting tongue of dullness could not utter? Could it be that I was face to face with intellectual emanations which would explain the mystery if I could but learn to discover and read them? I did not tell the older physicians of these things, for middle age is skeptical, cynical, and disinclined to accept new ideas. Besides, the head of the institution had but lately warned me in his paternal way that I was overworking; that my mind needed a rest.

It had long been my belief that human thought consists basically of atomic or molecular motion, convertible into ether waves of radiant energy like heat, light and electricity. This belief had early led me to contemplate the possibility of telepathy or mental communication by means of suitable apparatus, and I had in my college days prepared a set of transmitting and receiving instruments somewhat similar to the cumbrous devices employed in wireless telegraphy at that crude, pre-radio period. These I had tested with a fellow-student, but achieving no result, had soon packed them away with other scientific odds and ends for possible future use.

Now, in my intense desire to probe into the dream-life of Joe Slater, I sought these instruments again, and spent several days in repairing them for action. When they were complete once more I missed no opportunity for their trial. At each outburst of Slater's violence, I would fit the transmitter to his forehead and the receiver to my own, constantly making delicate adjustments for various hypothetical wave-lengths of intellectual energy. I had but little notion of how the thought-impressions would, if successfully conveyed, arouse an intelligent response in my brain, but I felt certain that I could detect and interpret them. Accordingly I continued my experiments, though informing no one of their nature.

It was on the twenty-first of February, 1901, that the thing occurred. As I look back across the years I realize how unreal it seems, and sometimes half won-

der if old Doctor Fenton was not right when he charged it all to my excited imagination. I recall that he listened with great kindness and patience when I told him, but afterward gave me a nerve-powder and arranged for the half-year's vacation on which I departed the next week.

That fateful night I was wildly agitated and perturbed, for despite the excellent care he had received, Joe Slater was unmistakably dying. Perhaps it was his mountain freedom that he missed, or perhaps the turmoil in his brain had grown too acute for his rather sluggish physique; but at all events the flame of vitality flickered low in the decadent body. He was drowsy near the end, and as darkness fell he dropped off into a troubled sleep.

I did not strap on the straitjacket as was customary when he slept, since I saw that he was too feeble to be dangerous, even if he woke in mental disorder once more before passing away. But I did place upon his head and mine the two ends of my cosmic "radio," hoping against hope for a first and last message from the dream world in the brief time remaining. In the cell with us was one nurse, a mediocre fellow who did not understand the purpose of the apparatus, or think to inquire into my course. As the hours wore on I saw his head droop awkwardly in sleep, but I did not disturb him. I myself, lulled by the rhythmical breathing of the healthy and the dying man, must have nodded a little later.

The sound of weird lyric melody was what aroused me. Chords, vibrations, and harmonic ecstasies echoed passionately on every hand, while on my ravished sight burst the stupendous spectacle of ultimate beauty. Walls, columns, and architraves of living fire blazed effulgently around the spot where I seemed to float in air, extending upward to an infinitely high vaulted dome of indescribable splendor. Blending with this display of palatial magnificence, or rather, supplanting it at times in kaleidoscopic rotation, were glimpses of wide plains and graceful valleys, high mountains and inviting grottoes, covered with every lovely attribute of scenery which my delighted eyes could conceive of, yet formed wholly of some glowing, ethereal plastic entity, which in consistency partook as much of spirit as of matter. As I gazed, I perceived that my own brain held the key to these enchanting metamorphoses; for each vista which appeared to me was the one my changing mind most wished to behold. Amidst this elysian realm I dwelt not as a stranger, for each sight and sound was familiar to me; just as it had been for uncounted eons of eternity before, and would be for like eternities to come.

Then the resplendent aura of my brother of light drew near and held colloquy with me, soul to soul, with silent and perfect interchange of thought. The hour was one of approaching triumph, for was not my fellow-being escaping at last from a degrading periodic bondage; escaping for ever, and preparing to follow the accursed oppressor even unto the uttermost fields of ether, that upon it might be wrought a flaming cosmic vengeance which would shake the spheres? We floated thus for a little time, when I perceived a slight blurring and fading of the objects around us, as though some force were recalling me to earth—where I least wished to go. The form near me seemed to feel a change also, for it gradually brought its discourse toward a conclusion, and itself prepared to quit the scene, fading from my sight at a rate somewhat less rapid than that of the other objects. A few more thoughts were exchanged, and I knew that the luminous one and I were being recalled to bondage, though for my brother of light it would

be the last time. The sorry planet shell being well-nigh spent, in less than an hour my fellow would be free to pursue the oppressor along the Milky Way and past the hither stars to the very confines of infinity.

A WELL-DEFINED shock separates my final impression of the fading scene of light from my sudden and somewhat shamefaced awakening and straightening up in my chair as I saw the dying figure on the couch move hesitantly. Joe Slater was indeed awaking, though probably for the last time. As I looked more closely, I saw that in the sallow cheeks shone spots of color which had never before been present. The lips, too, seemed unusual, being tightly compressed, as if by the force of a stronger character than had been Slater's. The whole face finally began to grow tense, and the head turned restlessly with closed eyes.

I did not rouse the sleeping nurse, but readjusted the slightly disarranged headbands of my telepathic "radio," intent to catch any parting message the dreamer might have to deliver. All at once the head turned sharply in my direction and the eyes fell open, causing me to stare in blank amazement at what I beheld. The man who had been Joe Slater, the Catskill decadent, was now gazing at me with a pair of luminous, expanding eyes whose blue seemed subtly to have deepened. Neither mania nor degeneracy was visible in that gaze, and I felt beyond a doubt that I was viewing a face behind which lay an active mind of high order.

At this juncture my brain became aware of a steady external influence operating upon it. I closed my eyes to concentrate my thoughts more profoundly, and was rewarded by the positive knowledge that *my long-sought mental message had come at last.* Each transmitted idea formed rapidly in my mind, and though no actual language was employed, my habitual association of conception and expression was so great that I seemed to be receiving the message in ordinary English.

"Joe Slater is dead," came the soul-petrifying voice of an agency from beyond the wall of sleep. My opened eyes sought the couch of pain in curious horror, but the blue eyes were still calmly gazing, and the countenance was still intelligently animated. "He is better dead, for he was unfit to bear the active intellect of cosmic entity. His gross body could not undergo the needed adjustments between ethereal life and planet life. He was too much an animal, too little a man; yet it is through his deficiency that you have come to discover me, for the cosmic and planet souls rightly should never meet. He has been in my torment and diurnal prison for forty-two of your terrestrial years.

"I am an entity like that which you yourself become in the freedom of dreamless sleep. I am your brother of light, and have floated with you in the effulgent valleys. It is not permitted me to tell your waking earth-self of your real self, but we are all roamers of vast spaces and travelers in many ages. Next year I may be dwelling in the Egypt which you call ancient, or in the cruel empire of Tsan Chan which is to come three thousand years hence. You and I have drifted to the worlds that reel about the red Arcturus, and dwelt in the bodies of the insect-philosophers that crawl proudly over the fourth moon of Jupiter. How little does the earth self know life and its extent! How little, indeed, ought it to know for its own tranquillity!

"Of the oppressor I cannot speak. You on earth have unwittingly felt its distant presence—you who without knowing idly gave the blinking beacon the name of *Algol, the Demon-Star.* It is to meet and

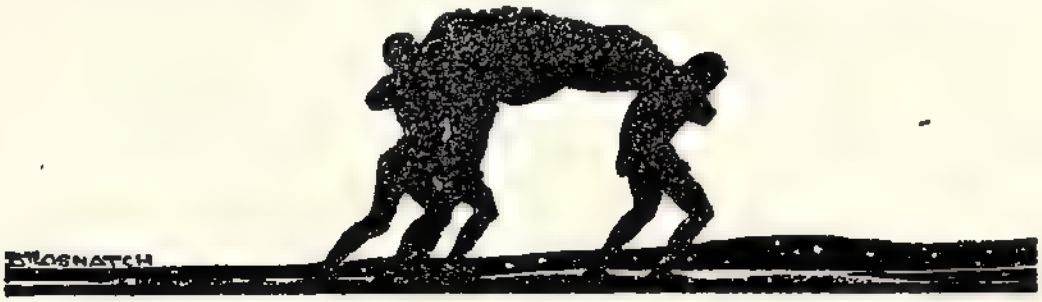
conquer the oppressor that I have vainly striven for eons, held back by bodily encumbrances. Tonight I go as a Nemesis bearing just and blazingly cataclysmic vengeance. *Watch me in the sky close by the Demon-Star.*

"I cannot speak longer, for the body of Joe Slater grows cold and rigid, and the coarse brains are ceasing to vibrate as I wish. You have been my only friend on this planet—the only soul to sense and seek for me within the repellent form which lies on this couch. We shall meet again—perhaps in the shining mists of Orion's Sword, perhaps on a bleak plateau in prehistoric Asia, perhaps in unremembered dreams tonight, perhaps in some other form an eon hence, when the solar system shall have been swept away."

At this point the thought-waves abruptly ceased, and the pale eyes of the dreamer—or can I say dead man?—commenced to glaze fishily. In a half-stupor I crossed over to the couch and felt of his wrist, but found it cold, stiff, and pulseless. The sallow cheeks paled again, and the thick lips fell open, disclosing the repulsively rotten fangs of the degenerate Joe Slater. I shivered, pulled a blanket over the hideous face, and awakened the nurse. Then I left the cell and went silently to my room. I had an instant and unaccountable craving for a sleep whose dreams I should not remember.

The climax? What plain tale of science can boast of such a rhetorical effect? I have merely set down certain things appealing to me as facts, allowing you to construe them as you will. As I have already admitted, my superior, old Doctor Fenton, denies the reality of everything I have related. He vows that I was broken down with nervous strain, and badly in need of the long vacation on full pay which he so generously gave me. He assures me on his professional honor that Joe Slater was but a low-grade paranoiac, whose fantastic notions must have come from the crude hereditary folk-tales which circulated in even the most decadent of communities. All this he tells me—yet I cannot forget what I saw in the sky on the night after Slater died. Lest you think me a biased witness, another pen must add this final testimony, which may perhaps supply the climax you expect. I will quote the following account of the star *Nova Persei* verbatim from the pages of that eminent astronomical authority, Professor Garrett P. Serviss:

"On February 22, 1901, a marvelous new star was discovered by Doctor Anderson of Edinburgh, *not very far from Algol.* No star had been visible at that point before. Within twenty-four hours the stranger had become so bright that it outshone Capella. In a week or two it had visibly faded, and in the course of a few months it was hardly discernible with the naked eye."



"The strange witch ointments gave it beast form and beast heart."

The Hairy Ones Shall Dance

By GANS T. FIELD

A novel of a hideous, stark horror that struck during a spirit séance—a tale of terror and sudden death, and the frightful thing that laired in the Devil's Croft

The Story Thus Far

TALBOT WILLS, the narrator, is a former stage magician. Skeptical of psychic phenomena, he goes with Doctor Zoberg to an isolated hamlet, where, says Zoberg, lives a medium who will prove the case for spiritism.

The medium is an attractive girl, Susan Gird. At a séance, a bestial shape appears in the darkened room and kills John Gird, the medium's father. The town

constable accuses Wills, as the only person able to escape the manacles which confined everyone in the room. A mob gathers to lynch the supposed murderer, and he manages to escape from a cell, fleeing for shelter to a grove on the edge of town. This is called the Devil's Croft, and custom and local law forbid anyone to enter it.

Once inside, he finds, though a blizzard rages without, the grove is as warm and green as the tropics. In its depths he encounters and fights with the same beast-shape that killed John Gird. By a lucky blow he stuns it, and is horrified to see it turning gradually human. He flees from the grove and meets Judge Keith Pursuivant, a scholarly recluse, who shelters him and shows him, by logic and by quotation of distinguished authorities, that a werewolf can be explained by the spiritist theory of ectoplasmic materialization.

The following day Judge Pursuivant goes to town to observe conditions, and sends Susan Gird to his home to talk to Wills. The two are beginning to be drawn to each other, though in Wills' mind lingers the possibility that Susan Gird may have a complex personality that sometimes materializes the beast-thing.

Returning from town, the judge tells them that the mysterious monster, apparently still in the forbidden grove, has claimed another victim.

The story continues:

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11. "To Meet that Monster Face to Face!"

I THINK that both Susan and I fairly reeled before this news, like actors registering surprize in an old-fashioned melodrama. As for Judge Pursuivant, he turned to the table, cut a generous wedge of the meat pie and set it, all savory and steaming, on a plate for himself. His calm zest for the good food gave us others steadiness again, so that we sat down and even ate a little as he described his day in town.

He had found opportunity to talk to Susan in private, confiding in her about me and finally sending her to me; this, as he said, so that we would convince each other of our respective innocences. It was purely an inspiration, for he had had no idea, of course, that such conviction would turn out so final. Thereafter he made shift to enter the Gird house and talk to Doctor Zoberg.

That worthy he found sitting somewhat limply in the parlor, with John Gird's coffin in the next room. Zoberg, the judge reported, was mystified about the murder and anxious to bring to justice the townsfolk — there were more than one, it seemed — who had beaten him. Most of all, however, he was concerned about the charges against me.

"His greatest anxiety is to prove you innocent," Judge Pursuivant informed me. "He intends to bring the best lawyer possible for your defense, is willing even to assist in paying the fee. He also swears that character witnesses can be brought to testify that you are the most peaceable and law-abiding man in the country."

"That's mighty decent of him," I said. "According to your reasoning of this morning, his attitude proves him innocent, too."

"What reasoning was that?" asked Susan, and I was glad that the judge continued without answering her.

"I was glad that I had sent Miss Susan on. If your car had remained there, Mr. Wills, Doctor Zoberg might have driven off in it to rally your defenses."

"Not if I know him," I objected. "The whole business, what of the mystery and occult significances, will hold him right on the spot. He's relentlessly

curious and, despite his temporary collapse, he's no coward."

"I agree with that," chimed in Susan.

As for my pursuers of the previous night, the judge went on, they had been roaming the snow-covered streets in twos and threes, heavily armed for the most part and still determined to punish me for killing their neighbor. The council was too frightened or too perplexed to deal with the situation, and the constable was still in bed, with his brother assuming authority, when Judge Pursuivant made his inquiries. The judge went to see the wounded man, who very pluckily determined to rise and take up his duties again.

"I'll arrest the man who plugged me," O'Bryant had promised grimly, "and that kid brother of mine can quit playing policeman."

The judge applauded these sentiments, and brought him hot food and whisky, which further braced his spirits. In the evening came the invasion by the younger O'Bryant of the Devil's Croft, and his resultant death at the claws and teeth of what prowled there.

"His throat was so torn open and filled with blood that he could not speak," the judge concluded, "but he pointed back into the timber, and then tried to trace something in the snow with his finger. It looked like a wolf's head, with pointed nose and ears. He died before he finished."

"You saw him come out?" I asked.

"No. I'd gone back to town, but later I saw the body, and the sketch in the snow."

He finished his dinner and pushed back his chair. "Now," he said heartily, "it's up to us."

"Up to us to do what?" I inquired.

"To meet that monster face to face," he replied. "There are three of us and, so far as I can ascertain, but one of the enemy." Both Susan and I started to speak, but he held up his hand, smiling. "I know without being reminded that the odds are still against us, because the one enemy is fierce and blood-drinking, and can change shape and character. Maybe it can project itself to a distance—which makes it all the harder, both for us to face it and for us to get help."

"I know what you mean by that last," I nodded gloomily. "If there were ten thousand friendly constables in the neighborhood, instead of a single hostile one, they wouldn't believe us."

"Right," agreed Judge Pursuivant. "We're like the group of perplexed mortals in *Dracula,* who had only their own wits and weapons against a monster no more forbidding than ours."

It is hard to show clearly how his constant offering of parallels and rationalizations comforted us. Only the unknown and unknowable can terrify completely. We three were even cheerful over a bottle of wine that William fetched and poured out in three glasses. Judge Pursuivant gave us a toast—"May wolves go hungry!"—and Susan and I drank it gladly.

"Don't forget what's on our side," said the judge, putting down his glass. "I mean the stedfast and courageous heart, of which I preached to Wills last night, and which we can summon from within us any time and anywhere. The werewolf, dauntlessly faced, loses its dread; and I think we are the ones to face it. Now we're ready for action."

I said that I would welcome any kind of action whatsoever, and Susan touched my arm as if in endorsement of the remark. Judge Pursuivant's spectacles glittered in approval.

"You two will go into the Devil's Croft," he announced. "I'm going back to town once more."

"Into the Devil's Croft!" we almost shouted, both in the same shocked breath.

"Of course. Didn't we just get through with the agreement all around that the lycanthrope can and must be met face to face? Offense is the best defense, as perhaps one hundred thousand athletic trainers have reiterated."

"I've already faced the creature once," I reminded him. "As for appearing dauntless, I doubt my own powers of deceit."

"You shall have a weapon," he said. "A fire gives light, and we know that such things must have darkness—such as it finds in the midst of that swampy wood. So fill your pockets with matches, both of you."

"How about a gun?" I asked, but he shook his head.

"We don't want the werewolf killed. That would leave the whole business in mystery, and yourself probably charged with another murder. He'd return to his human shape, you know, the moment he was hurt even slightly."

Susan spoke, very calmly: "I'm ready to go into the Croft, Judge Pursuivant."

He clapped his hands loudly, as if applauding in a theater. "Bravo, my dear, bravo! I see Mr. Wills sets his jaw. That means he's ready to go with you. Very well, let us be off."

He called to William, who at his orders brought three lanterns—sturdy old-fashioned affairs, protected by strong wire nettings—and filled them with oil. We each took one and set out. It had turned clear and frosty once more, and the moon shone too brightly for my comfort, at least. However, as we approached the grove, we saw no sentinels; they could hardly be blamed for deserting, after the fate of the younger O'Bryant.

We gained the shadow of the outer cedars unchallenged. Here Judge Pursuivant called a halt, produced a match from his overcoat pocket and lighted our lanterns all around. I remember that we struck a fresh light for Susan's lantern; we agreed that, silly as the three-on-a match superstition might be, this was no time or place to tempt Providence.

"Come on," said Judge Pursuivant then, and led the way into the darkest part of the immense thicket.

12. "We Are Here at His Mercy."

WE FOLLOWED Judge Pursuivant, Susan and I, without much of a thought beyond an understandable dislike for being left alone on the brink of the timber. It was a slight struggle to get through the close-set cedar hedge, especially for Susan, but beyond it we soon caught up with the judge. He strode heavily and confidently among the trees, his lantern held high to shed light upon broad, polished leaves and thick, wet stems. The moist warmth of the grove's interior made itself felt again, and the judge explained again and at greater length the hot springs that made possible this surprizing condition. All the while he kept going. He seemed to know his way in that forbidden fastness—indeed, he must have explored it many times to go straight to his destination.

That destination was a clearing, in some degree like the one where I had met and fought with my hairy pursuer on the night before. This place had, however, a great tree in its center, with branches that shot out in all directions to hide away the sky completely. By straining the ears one could catch a faint murmur of water—my scalding stream, no doubt. Around us were the thick-set trunks of the forest, filled in between with brush and vines, and underfoot grew velvety moss.

"This will be our headquarters position," said the judge. "Wills, help me

gather wood for a fire. Break dead branches from the standing trees—never mind picking up wood from the ground, it will be too damp."

Together we collected a considerable heap and, crumpling a bit of paper in its midst, he kindled it.

"Now, then," he went on, "I'm heading for town. You two will stay here and keep each other company."

He took our lanterns, blew them out and ran his left arm through the loops of their handles.

"I'm sure that nothing will attack you in the light of the fire. You're bound to attract whatever skulks hereabouts, however. When I come back, we ought to be prepared to go into the final act of our little melodrama."

He touched my hand, bowed to Susan, and went tramping away into the timber. The thick leafage blotted his lantern-light from our view before his back had been turned twenty seconds.

Susan and I gazed at each other, and smiled rather uneasily.

"It's warm," she breathed, and took off her cloak. Dropping it upon one of the humped roots of the great central tree, she sat down on it with her back to the trunk. "What kind of a tree is this?"

I gazed up at the gnarled stem, or as much of it as I could see in the firelight. Finally I shook my head.

"I don't know—I'm no expert," I admitted. "At least it's very big, and undoubtedly very old—the sort of tree that used to mark a place of sacrifice."

At the word "sacrifice," Susan lifted her shoulders as if in distaste. "You're right, Talbot. It would be something grim and Druid-like." She began to recite, half to herself:

> That tree in whose dark shadow
> The ghastly priest doth reign,
> The priest who slew the slayer
> And shall himself be slain.

"Macaulay," I said at once. Then, to get her mind off of morbid things, "I had to recite *The Lays of Ancient Rome* in school, when I was a boy. 'I wish you hadn't mentioned it."

"You mean, because it's an evil omen?" She shook her head, and contrived a smile that lighted up her pale face. "It's not that, if you analyze it. 'Shall himself be slain'—it sounds as if the enemy's fate is sealed."

I nodded, then spun around sharply, for I fancied I heard a dull crashing at the edge of the clearing. Then I went here and there, gathering wood enough to keep our fire burning for some time. One branch, a thick, straight one, I chose from the heap and leaned against the big tree, within easy reach of my hand.

"That's for a club," I told Susan, and she half shrunk, half stiffened at the implication.

We fell to talking about Judge Pursuivant, the charm and the enigma that invested him. Both of us felt gratitude that he had immediately clarified our own innocence in the grisly slayings, but to both came a sudden inspiration, distasteful and disquieting. I spoke first:

"Susan! Why did the judge bring us here?"

"He said, to help face and defeat the monster. But—but——"

"Who is that monster?" I demanded. "What human being puts on a semi-bestial appearance, to rend and kill?"

"Y—you don't mean the judge?"

As I say, it had been in both our minds. We were silent, and felt shame and embarrassment.

"Look here," I went on earnestly after a moment; "perhaps we're being ungrateful, but we mustn't be unprepared. Think, Susan; nobody knows where Judge Pursuivant was at the time of your father's death, at the time I saw the thing in these woods." I broke off, remember-

ing how I had met the judge for the first time, so shortly after my desperate struggle with the point-eared demon. "Nobody knows where he was when the constable's brother was attacked and mortally wounded."

She gazed about fearfully. "Nobody," she added breathlessly, "knows where he is now."

I was remembering a conversation with him; he had spoken of books, mentioning a rare, a supposedly non-existent volume. What was it? . . . the *Wicked Bible.* And what was it I had once heard about that work?

It came back to me now, out of the sub-conscious brain-chamber where, apparently, one stores everything he hears or reads in idleness, and from which such items creep on occasion. It had been in Lewis Spence's *Encyclopedia of Occultism,* now on the shelf in my New York apartment.

The *Wicked Bible,* scripture for witches and wizards, from which magic-mongers of the Dark Ages drew their inspiration and their knowledge! And Judge Pursuivant had admitted to having one!

What had he learned from it? How had he been so glib about the science—yes, and the psychology—of being a werewolf?

"If what we suspect is true," I said to Susan, "we are here at his mercy. Nobody is going to come in here, not if horses dragged them. At his leisure he will fall upon us and tear us to pieces."

But, even as I spoke, I despised myself for my weak fears in her presence. I picked up my club and was comforted by its weight and thickness.

"I met that devil once," I said, studying cheer and confidence into my voice this time. "I don't think it relished the meeting any too much. Next time won't be any more profitable for it."

She smiled at me, as if in comradely encouragement; then we both started and fell silent. There had risen, somewhere among the thickets, a long low whining.

I PUT out a foot, stealthily, as though fearful of being caught in motion. A quick kick flung more wood on the fire. I blinked in the light and felt the heat. Standing there, as a primitive man might have stood in his flame-guarded camp to face the horrors of the ancient world, I tried to judge by ear the direction of that whine.

It died, and I heard, perhaps in my imagination, a stealthy padding. Then the whining began again, from a new quarter and nearer.

I made myself step toward it. My shadow, leaping grotesquely among the tree trunks, almost frightened me out of my wits. The whine had changed into a crooning wail, such as that with which dogs salute the full moon. It seemed to plead, to promise; and it was coming closer to the clearing.

Once before I had challenged and taunted the thing with scornful words. Now I could not make my lips form a single syllable. Probably it was just as well, for I thought and watched the more. Something black and cautious was moving among the branches, just beyond the shrubbery that screened it from our firelight. I knew, without need of a clear view, what that black something was. I lifted my club to the ready.

The sound it made had become in some fashion articulate, though not human in any quality. There were no words to it, but it spoke to the heart. The note of plea and promise had become one of command—and not directed to me.

I found my own voice.

"Get out of here, you devil!" I roared at it, and threw my club. Even as I let go of it, I wished I had not. The bushes foiled my aim, and the missile crashed

among them and dropped to the mossy ground. The creature fell craftily silent. Then I felt sudden panic and regret at being left weaponless, and I retreated toward the fire.

"Susan," I said huskily, "give me another stick. Hurry!"

She did not move or stir, and I rummaged frantically among the heaped dry branches for myself. Catching up the first piece of wood that would serve, I turned to her with worried curiosity.

She was still seated upon the cloak-draped root, but she had drawn herself tense, like a cat before a mouse-hole. Her head was thrust forward, so far that her neck extended almost horizontally. Her dilated eyes were turned in the direction from which the whining and crooning had come. They had a strange clarity in them, as if they could pierce the twigs and leaves and meet there an answering, understanding gaze.

"Susan!" I cried.

Still she gave no sign that she heard me, if hear me she did. She leaned farther forward, as if ready to spring up and run. Once more the unbeastly wail rose from the place where our watcher was lurking.

Susan's lips trembled. From them came slowly and softly, then louder, a long-drawn answering howl.

"Aoooooooooooooo! Aoooooooooooo-oooooooo!"

The stick almost fell from my hands. She rose, slowly but confidently. Her shoulders hunched high, her arms hung forward as though they wanted to reach to the ground. Again she howled:

"Aoooooooooooooooooooo!"

I saw that she was going to move across the clearing, toward the trees—through the trees. My heart seemed to twist into a knot inside me, but I could not let her do such a thing. I made a quick stride and planted myself before her.

"Susan, you mustn't!"

She shrank back, her face turning slowly up to mine. Her back was to the fire, yet light rose in her eyes, or perhaps behind them; a green light, such as reflects in still forest pools from the moon. Her hands lifted suddenly, as though to repel me. They were half closed and the crooked fingers drawn stiff, like talons.

"Susan!" I coaxed her, yet again, and she made no answer but tried to slip sidewise around me. I moved and headed her off, and she growled — actually growled, like a savage dog.

With my free hand I clutched her shoulder. Under my fingers her flesh was as taut as wire fabric. Then, suddenly, it relaxed into human tissue again, and she was standing straight. Her eyes had lost their weird light, they showed only dark and frightened.

"Talbot," she stammered. "Wh—what have I been doing?"

"Nothing, my dear," I comforted her. "It was nothing that we weren't able to fight back."

From the woods behind me came a throttling yelp, as of some hungry thing robbed of prey within its very grasp. Susan swayed, seemed about to drop, and I caught her quickly in my arms. Holding her thus, I turned my head and laughed over my shoulder.

"Another score against you!" I jeered at my enemy. "You didn't get her, not with all your filthy enchantments!"

Susan was beginning to cry, and I half led, half carried her back to the fireside. At my gesture she sat on her cloak again, as tractable as a child who repents of rebellion and tries to be obedient.

There were no more sounds from the timber. I could feel an emptiness there, as if the monster had slunk away, baffled.

13. *"Light's Our Best Weapon."*

NEITHER of us said anything for a while after that. I stoked up the fire, to be doing something, and it made us so uncomfortably warm that we had to crowd away from it. Sitting close against the tree-trunk, I began to imagine something creeping up the black lane of shadow it cast behind us to the edge of the clearing; and yet again I thought I heard noises. Club in hand, I went to investigate, and I was not disappointed in the least when I found nothing.

Finally Susan spoke. "This," she said, "is a new light on the thing."

"It's nothing to be upset about," I tried to comfort her.

"Not be upset!" She sat straight up, and in the light of the fire I could see a single pained line between her brows, deep and sharp as a chisel-gash. "Not when I almost turned into a beast!"

"How much of that do you remember?" I asked her.

"I was foggy in my mind, Talbot, almost as at the séance, but I remember being drawn—drawn to what was waiting out there." Her eyes sought the thickets on the far side of our blaze. "And it didn't seem horrible, but pleasant and welcome and—well, as if it were my kind. You," and she glanced quickly at me, then ashamedly away, "you were suddenly strange and to be avoided."

"Is that all?"

"It spoke to me," she went on in husky horror, "and I spoke to it."

I forbore to remind her that the only sound she had uttered was a wordless howl. Perhaps she did not know that—I hoped not. We said no more for another awkward time.

Finally she mumbled, "I'm not the kind of woman who cries easily; but I'd like to now."

"Go ahead," I said at once, and she did, and I let her. Whether I took her into my arms, or whether she came into them of her own accord, I do not remember exactly; but it was against my shoulder that she finished her weeping, and when she had finished she did feel better.

"That somehow washed the fog and the fear out of me," she confessed, almost brightly.

It must have been a full hour later that rustlings rose yet again in the timber. So frequently had my imagination tricked me that I did not so much as glance up. Then Susan gave a little startled cry, and I sprang to my feet. Beyond the fire a tall, gray shape had become visible, with a pale glare of light around it.

"Don't be alarmed," called a voice I knew. "It is I—Otto Zoberg."

"Doctor!" I cried, and hurried to meet him. For the first time in my life, I felt that he was a friend. Our differences of opinion, once making companionship strained, had so dwindled to nothing in comparison to the danger I faced, and his avowed trust in me as innocent of murder.

"How are you?" I said, wringing his hand. "They say you were hurt by the mob."

"*Ach,* it was nothing serious," he reassured me. "Only this." He touched with his forefinger an eye, and I could see that it was bruised and swollen half shut. "A citizen with too ready a fist and too slow a mind has that to answer for."

"I'm partly responsible," I said. "You were trying to help me, I understand, when it happened."

MORE noise behind him, and two more shapes pushed into the clearing. I recognized Judge Pursuivant, nodding to me with his eyes bright under his wide hat-brim. The other man, angular, falcon-faced, one arm in a sling, I had also seen before. It was Constable O'Bry-

ant. I spoke to him, but he gazed past me, apparently not hearing.

Doctor Zoberg saw my perplexed frown, and he turned back toward the constable. Snapping long fingers in front of the great hooked nose, he whistled shrilly. O'Bryant started, grunted, then glared around as though he had been suddenly and rudely awakened.

"What's up?" he growled menacingly, and his sound hand moved swiftly to a holster at his side. Then his eyes found me, and with an oath he drew his revolver.

"Easy, Constable! Easy does it," soothed Judge Pursuivant, his own great hand clutching O'Bryant's wrist. "You've forgotten that I showed how Mr. Wills must be innocent."

"I've forgotten what we're here for at all," snapped O'Bryant, gazing around the clearing. "Hey, have I been drunk or something? I said that I'd never——"

"I'll explain," offered Zoberg. "The judge met me in town, and we came together to see you. Remember? You said you would like to avenge your brother's death, and came with us. Then, when you balked at the very edge of this Devil's Croft, I took the liberty of hypnotizing you."

"Huh? How did you do that?" growled the officer.

"With a look, a word, a motion of the hand," said Zoberg, his eyes twinkling. "Then you ceased all objections and came in with us."

Pursuivant clapped O'Bryant on the unwounded shoulder. "Sit down," he invited, motioning toward the roots of the tree.

The five of us gathered around the fire, like picknickers instead of allies against a supernormal monster. There, at Susan's insistence, I told of what had happened since Judge Pursuivant had left us. All listened with rapt attention, the constable grunting occasionally, the judge clicking his tongue, and Doctor Zoberg in absolute silence.

It was Zoberg who made the first comment after I had finished. "This explains many things," he said.

"It don't explain a doggone thing," grumbled O'Bryant.

Zoberg smiled at him, then turned to Judge Pursuivant. "Your ectoplasmic theory of lycanthropy—such as you have explained it to me—is most interesting and, I think, valid. May I advance it a trifle?"

"In what way?" asked the judge.

"Ectoplasm, as you see it, forms the werewolf by building upon the medium's body. But is not ectoplasm more apt, according to the observations of many people, to draw completely away and form a separate and complete thing of itself? The thing may be beastly, as you suggest. Algernon Blackwood, the English writer of psychic stories, almost hits upon it in one of his 'John Silence' tales. He described an astral personality taking form and threatening harm while its physical body slept."

"I know the story you mean," agreed Judge Pursuivant. "*The Camp of the Dog*, I think it's called."

"Very well, then. Perhaps, while Miss Susan's body lay in a trance, securely handcuffed between Wills and myself——"

"Oh!" wailed Susan. "Then it was I, after all."

"It couldn't have been you," I told her at once.

"But it was! And, while I was at the judge's home with you, part of me met the constable's brother in this wood." She stared wildly around her.

"It might as well have been part of *me*," I argued, and O'Bryant glared at me as if in sudden support of that likelihood. But Susan shook her head.

"No, for which of us responded to the call of that thing out there?"

For the hundredth time she gazed fearfully through the fire at the bushes behind which the commanding whine had risen.

"I have within me," she said dully, "a nature that will break out, look and act like a beast-demon, will kill even my beloved father——"

"Please," interjected Judge Pursuivant earnestly, "you must not take responsibility upon yourself for what happened. If the ectoplasm engendered by you made up the form of the killer, the spirit may have come from without."

"How could it?" she asked wretchedly.

"How could Marthe Beraud exude ectoplasm that formed a bearded, masculine body?" Pursuivant looked across to Zoberg. "Doctor, you surely know the famous 'Bien Boa' séance, and how the materialized entity spoke Arabic when the medium, a Frenchwoman, knew little or nothing of that language?"

Zoberg sat with bearded chin on lean hand. His joined brows bristled the more as he corrugated his forehead in thought. "We are each a thousand personalities," he said, sententiously if not comfortingly. "How can we rule them all, or rule even one of them?"

O'BRYANT said sourly that all this talk was too high flown for him to understand or to enjoy. He dared hope, however, that the case could never be tied up to Miss Susan Gird, whom he had known and liked since her babyhood.

"It can never do that," Zoberg said definitely. "No court or jury would convict her on the evidence we are offering against her."

I ventured an opinion: "While you are attempting to show that Susan is a werewolf, you are forgetting that something else was prowling around our fire, just out of sight."

"*Ach*, just out of sight!" echoed Zoberg. "That means you aren't sure what it was."

"Or even that there was anything," added Susan, so suddenly and strongly that I, at least, jumped.

"There was something, all right," I insisted. "I heard it."

"You thought you heard a sound behind the tree," Susan reminded me. "You looked, and there was nothing."

Everyone gazed at me, rather like staid adults at a naughty child. I said, ungraciously, that my imagination was no better than theirs, and that I was no easier to frighten. Judge Pursuivant suggested that we make a search of the surrounding woods, for possible clues.

"A good idea," approved Constable O'Bryant. "The ground's damp. We might find some sort of footprints."

"Then you stay here with Miss Susan," the judge said to him. "We others will circle around."

The gaunt constable shook his head. "Not much, mister. I'm in on whatever searching is done. I've got something to settle with whatever killed my kid brother."

"But there are only three lanterns," pointed out Judge Pursuivant. "We have to carry them—light's our best weapon."

Zoberg then spoke up, rather diffidently, to say that he would be glad to stay with Susan. This was agreed upon, and the other three of us prepared for the search.

I took the lantern from Zoberg's hand, nodded to the others, and walked away among the trees.

14. "I Was—I Am—a Wolf"

DELIBERATELY I had turned my face toward the section beyond the fire, for, as I have said repeatedly, it was there

that I had heard the movements and cries of the being that had so strongly moved and bewitched Susan. My heart whispered rather loudly that I must look for myself at its traces or lack of them, or for ever view myself with scorn.

Almost at once I found tracks, the booted tracks of my three allies. Shaking my lantern to make it flare higher, I went deeper among the clumps, my eyes quartering the damp earth. After a few moments I found what I had come to look for.

The marks were round and rather vague as to toe-positions, yet not so clear-cut as to be made by hoofs. Rather they suggested a malformed stump or a palm with no fingers, and they were deep enough to denote considerable weight; the tracks of my own shoes, next to them, were rather shallower. I bent for a close look, then straightened up, looked everywhere at once, and held my torch above my head to shed light all around; for I had suddenly felt eyes upon me.

I caught just a glimpse as of two points of light, fading away into some leafage and in the direction of the clearing, and toward them I made my way; but there was nothing there, and the only tracks underfoot were of shod human beings, myself or one of the others. I returned to my outward search, following the round tracks.

They were plainly of only two feet—there were no double impressions, like those of a quadruped—but I must have stalked along them for ten minutes when I realized that I had no way of telling whether they went forward or backward. I might be going away from my enemy instead of toward it. A close examination did me little good, and I further pondered that the creature would lurk near the clearing, not go so straight away. Thus arguing within myself, I doubled back.

Coming again close to the starting-point, I thought of a quick visit to the clearing and a comforting word or two with Susan and Zoberg. Surely I was almost there; but why did not the fire gleam through the trees? Were they out of wood? Perplexed, I quickened my pace. A gnarled tree grew in my path, its low branches heavily bearded with vines. Beyond this rose only the faintest of glows. I paused to push aside some strands and peer.

The fire had almost died, and by its light I but half saw two figures, one tall and one slender, standing together well to one side. They faced each other, and the taller—a seeming statue of wet-looking gray—held its companion by a shoulder. The other gray hand was stroking the smaller one's head, pouring grayness thereon.

I saw only this much, without stopping to judge or to wonder. Then I yelled, and sprang into the clearing. At my outcry the two fell apart and faced me. The smallest was Susan, who took a step in my direction and gave a little smothered whimper, as though she was trying to speak through a blanket. I ran to her side, and with a rough sweep of my sleeve I cleared from her face and head a mass of slimy, shiny jelly.

"You!" I challenged the other shape. "What have you been trying to do to her?"

For only a breathing-space it stood still, as featureless and clumsy as a half-formed figure of gray mud. Then darkness sprang out upon it, and hair. Eyes blazed at me, green and fearsome. A sharp muzzle opened to emit a snarl.

"Now I know you," I hurled at it. "I'm going to kill you."

And I charged.

Claws ripped at my head, missed and tore the cloth of my coat. One of my

arms shot around a lean, hairy middle with powerful muscles straining under its skin, and I drove my other fist for where I judged the pit of the stomach to be. Grappled, we fell and rolled over. The beast smell I remembered was all about us, and I knew that jaws were shoving once again at my throat. I jammed my forearm between them, so far into the hinge of them that they could not close nor crush. My other hand clutched the skin of the throat, a great loose fistful, drew it taut and began to twist with all my strength. I heard a half-broken yelp of strangled pain, felt a slackening of the body that struggled against me, knew that it was trying to get away. But I managed to roll on top, straddling the thing.

"You're not so good on defense," I panted, and brought my other hand to the throat, for I had no other idea save to kill. Paws grasped and tore at my wrists. There was shouting at my back, in Susan's voice and several others. Hands caught me by the shoulders and tried to pull me up and away.

"No!" I cried. "This is it, the werewolf!"

"It's Doctor Zoberg, you idiot," growled O'Bryant in my ear. "Come on, let him up."

"Yes," added Judge Pursuivant, "it's Doctor Zoberg, as you say; but a moment ago it was the monster we have been hunting."

I had been dragged upright by now, and so had Zoberg. He could only choke and glare for the time being, his fingers to his half-crushed throat. Pursuivant had moved within clutching distance of him, and was eyeing him as a cat eyes a mouse.

"Like Wills, I only pretended to search, then doubled back to watch," went on the judge. "I saw Zoberg and Miss Susan talking. He spoke quietly, rhythmically, commandingly. She went into half a trance, and I knew she was hypnotized.

"As the fire died down, he began the change. Ectoplasm gushed out and over him. Before it took form, he began to smear some upon her. And Mr. Wills here came out of the woods and at him."

O'Bryant looked from the judge to Zoberg. Then he fumbled with his undamaged hand in a hip pocket, produced handcuffs and stepped forward. The accused man grinned through his beard, as if admitting defeat in some trifling game. Then he held out his wrists with an air of resignation and I, who had manacled them once, wondered again at their corded strength. The irons clicked shut upon one, then the other.

"You know everything now," said Zoberg, in a soft voice but a steady one. "I was—I am—a wolf; a wolf who hoped to mate with an angel."

His bright eyes rested upon Susan, who shrank back. Judge Pursuivant took a step toward the prisoner.

"There is no need for you to insult her," he said.

Zoberg grinned at him, with every long tooth agleam. "Do you want to hear my confession, or don't you?"

"Sure we want to hear it," grunted O'Bryant. "Leave him alone, judge, and let him talk." He glanced at me. "Got any paper, Mr. Wills? Somebody better take this down in writing."

I produced a wad of note-paper and a stub pencil. Placing it upon my knee, with the lantern for light, I scribbled, almost word for word, the tale that Doctor Zoberg told.

15. "And That Is the End."

"PERHAPS I was born what I am," he began. "At least, even as a lad I knew that there was a lust and a power for evil within me. Night called to me,

where it frightens most children. I would slip out of my father's house and run for miles, under the trees or across fields, with the moon for company. This was in Germany, of course, before the war."

"During the war——" began Judge Pursuivant.

"During the war, when most men were fighting, I was in prison." Again Zoberg grinned, briefly and without cheer. "I had found it easy and inspiring to kill persons, with a sense of added strength following. But they caught me and put me in what they called an asylum. I was supposed to be crazy. They confined me closely, but I, reading books in the library, grew to know what the change was that came upon me at certain intervals. I turned my attention to it, and became able to control the change, bringing it on or holding it off at will."

He looked at Susan again. "But I'm ahead of my story. Once, when I was at school, I met a girl—an American student of science and philosophy. She laughed at my wooing, but talked to me about spirits and psychical phenomena. That, my dear Susan, was your mother. When the end of the war brought so many new things, it also brought a different viewpoint toward many inmates of asylums. Some Viennese doctors, and later Sigmund Freud himself, found my case interesting. Of course, they did not arrive at the real truth, or they would not have procured my release."

"After that," I supplied, writing swiftly, "you became an expert psychical investigator and journeyed to America."

"Yes, to find the girl who had once laughed and studied with me. After some years I came to this town, simply to trace the legend of this Devil's Croft. And here, I found, she had lived and died, and left behind a daughter that was her image."

Judge Pursuivant cleared his throat. "I suspect that you're leaving out part of your adventures, Doctor."

Zoberg actually laughed. "*Ja,* I thought to spare you a few shocks. But if you will have them, you may. I visited Russia—and in 1922 a medical commission of the Soviet Union investigated several score mysterious cases of peasants killed —and eaten." He licked his lips, like a cat who thinks of meat. "In Paris I founded and conducted a rather interesting night school, for the study of diabolism in its relationship to science. And in 1936, certain summer vacationists on Long Island were almost frightened out of their wits by a lurking thing that seemed half beast, half man." He chuckled. "Your *Literary Digest* made much of it. The lurking thing was, of course, myself."

We stared. "Say, why do you do these things?" the constable blurted.

Zoberg turned to him, head quizzically aslant. "Why do you uphold your local laws? Or why does Judge Pursuivant study ancient philosophies? Or why do Wills and Susan turn soft eyes upon each other? Because the heart of each so insists."

Susan was clutching my arm. Her fingers bit into my flesh as Zoberg's eyes sought her again.

"I found the daughter of someone I once loved," he went on, with real gentleness in his voice. "Wills, at least, can see in her what I saw. A new inspiration came to me, a wish and a plan to have a comrade in my secret exploits."

"A beast-thing like yourself?" prompted the judge.

Zoberg nodded. "A *lupa* to my *lupus.* But this girl—Susan Gird—had not inherited the psychic possibilities of her mother."

"What!" I shouted. "You yourself said

that she was the greatest medium of all time!"

"I did say so. But it was a lie."

"Why, in heaven's name——"

"It was my hope," he broke in quietly, "to make of her a medium, or a lycanthrope—call the phenomenon which you will. Are you interested in my proposed method?" He gazed mockingly around, and his eyes rested finally upon me. "Make full notes, Wills. This will be interesting, if not stupefying, to the psychic research committees.

"It is, as you know, a supernormal substance that is exuded to change the appearance of my body. What, I wondered, would some of that substance do if smeared upon her?"

I started to growl out a curse upon him, but Judge Pursuivant, rapt, motioned for me to keep silent.

"Think back through all the demonologies you have read," Zoberg was urging. "What of the strange 'witch ointments' that, spread over an ordinary human body, gave it beast-form and beast-heart? There, again, legend had basis in scientific fact."

"By the thunder, you're logical," muttered Judge Pursuivant.

"And damnable," I added. "Go on, Doctor. You were going to smear the change-stuff upon Susan."

"But first, I knew, I must convince her that she had within her the essence of a wolf. And so, the séances."

"She was no medium," I said again.

"I made her think she was. I hypnotized her, and myself did weird wonders in the dark room. But she, in a trance, did not know. I needed witnesses to convince her."

"So you invited Mr. Wills," supplied Judge Pursuivant.

"Yes, and her father. They had been prepared to accept her as medium and me as observer. Seeing a beast-form, they would tell her afterward that it was she."

"Zoberg," I said between set teeth, "you're convicted out of your own mouth of rottenness that convinces me of the existence of the Devil after whom this grove was named. I wish to heaven that I'd killed you when we were fighting."

"*Ach,* Wills," he chuckled, "you'd have missed this most entertaining autobiographical lecture."

"He's right," grumbled O'Bryant; and, "Let him go on," the judge pleaded with me.

"ONCE sure of this power within her," Zoberg said deeply, "she would be prepared in heart and soul to change at touch of the ointment—the ectoplasm. Then, to me she must turn as a fellow-creature. Together, throughout the world, adventuring in a way unbelievable——"

His voice died, and we let it. He stood in the firelight, head thrown back, manacled hands folded. He might have been a martyr instead of a fiend for whom a death at the stake would be too easy.

"I can tell what spoiled the séance," I told him after a moment. "Gird, sitting opposite, saw that it was you, not Susan, who had changed. You had to kill him to keep him from telling, there and then."

"Yes," agreed Zoberg. "After that, you were arrested, and, later, threatened. I was in an awkward position. Susan must believe herself, not you, guilty. That is why I have championed you throughout. I went then to look for you."

"And attacked me," I added.

"The beast-self was ascendant. I cannot always control it completely." He sighed. "When Susan disappeared, I went to look for her on the second evening. When I came into this wood, the

change took place, half automatically. Associations, I suppose. Constable, your brother happened upon me in an evil hour."

"Yep," said O'Bryant gruffly.

"And that is the end," Zoberg said. "The end of the story and, I suppose, the end of me."

"You bet it is," the constable assured him. "You came with the judge to finish your rotten work. But we're finishing it for you."

"One moment," interjected Judge Pursuivant, and his fire-lit face betrayed a perplexed frown. "The story fails to explain one important thing."

"Does it so?" prompted Zoberg, inclining toward him with a show of negligent grace.

"If you were able to free yourself and kill Mr. Gird——"

"By heaven, that's right!" I broke in. "You were chained, Zoberg, to Susan and to your chair. I'd go bail for the strength and tightness of those handcuffs."

He grinned at each of us in turn and held out his hands with their manacles. "Is it not obvious?" he inquired.

We looked at him, a trifle blankly I suppose, for he chuckled once again.

"Another employment of the ectoplasm, that useful substance of change," he said gently. "At will my arms and legs assume thickness, and hold the rings of the confining irons wide. Then, when I wish, they grow slender again, and——"

He gave his hands a sudden flirt, and the bracelets fell from them on the instant. He pivoted and ran like a deer.

"Shoot!" cried the judge, and O'Bryant whipped the big gun from his holster.

Zoberg was almost within a vine-laced clump of bushes when O'Bryant fired. I heard a shrill scream, and saw Zoberg falter and drop to his hands and knees.

We were all starting forward. I paused a moment to put Susan behind me, and in that moment O'Bryant and Pursuivant sprang ahead and came up on either side of Zoberg. He was still alive, for he writhed up to a kneeling position and made a frantic clutch at the judge's coat. O'Bryant, so close that he barely raised his hand and arm, fired a second time.

Zoberg spun around somehow on his knees, stiffened and screamed. Perhaps I should say that he howled. In his voice was the inarticulate agony of a beast wounded to death. Then he collapsed.

Both men stooped above him, cautious but thorough in their examination. Finally Judge Pursuivant straightened up and faced toward us.

"Keep Miss Susan there with you," he warned me. "He's dead, and not a pretty sight."

Slowly they came back to us. Pursuivant was thoughtful, while O'Bryant, Zoberg's killer, seemed cheerful for the first time since I had met him. He even smiled at me, as Punch would smile after striking a particularly telling blow with his cudgel. Rubbing his pistol caressingly with his palm, he stowed it carefully away.

"I'm glad that's over," he admitted. "My brother can rest easy in his grave."

"And we have our work cut out for us," responded the judge. "We must decide just how much of the truth to tell when we make a report."

O'Bryant dipped his head in sage acquiescence. "You're right," he rumbled. "Yes, sir, you're right."

"Would you believe me," said the judge, "if I told you that I knew it was Zoberg, almost from the first?"

But Susan and I, facing each other, were beyond being surprized, even at that.

[THE END]

Guarded

By MEARLE PROUT

A brief tale of a murder and an attempted murder—by the author of "The House of the Worm"

THE sound of a shot suddenly broke the stillness of the May morning, and echoed back from across the valley. A puff of blue smoke arose from a clump of green-briars and drifted away downwind. Out in the road, Abner Simmons dropped the bag of grain he was carrying and, with a look of dumb surprize, sank in a quivering heap to the ground. Half his side had been shot away.

The green-briars parted with a sudden life and Jed Tolliver emerged, straightening his long form as he shambled toward the road. As he walked he broke his double-barreled shotgun, flicked out the empty cartridge and blew through the barrel, sending a thin stream of acrid smoke out of the chamber. He stooped over his fallen enemy.

"Said I'd get you," he reminded the other brutally. He inserted a fresh cartridge and closed the gun with a snap.

The man in the road rolled over with a convulsive movement and stared up at him.

"That kid brother of yours is next—and last," Jed continued. "Then I'll be through with the lot of you."

Abner grinned. It is an awful thing to see a dying man grin. Jed shuddered in spite of himself.

"You can't, Jed—not Ezekiel——"

It was not a pleading. Rather, it was calm, assured, as though the other were stating a known fact. Jed shuddered again, before he felt quick anger rising.

"I got you, didn't I?" he said, ejecting a thick stream of tobacco juice. "What makes you think I won't get Ezekiel the same way?"

"You won't, Jed—you can't—because—I won't let you!"

He was fast weakening from the frightful flow of blood. Overcome from the effort of speaking, Abner closed his eyes and lay still. A second later a sudden convulsive movement shook his body, and his eyes opened again. This time they were fixed and staring.

With a grunt of satisfaction Jed shouldered his gun and started back up the mountain, moving with the long effortless stride of the Tennessee mountaineer. He did not fear punishment for his crime. Here in the Tennessee mountains the long arm of the law seldom reached. The only thing to fear in a case of this kind was the dead man's relatives, and now there was only one—Ezekiel, a slim lad of twenty, who could not even shoot expertly.

Yes, Jed reflected as his long strides carried him through the sparse growth of cedar and blackjack, this part of Tennessee would soon again be a decent, God-fearing community. . . . Foreigners, the Simmonses had been, from somewhere back East—Carolina, or Virginia, maybe. They hadn't been like the mountain-folk. . . .

And what was that crazy talk Abner had made? He'd stop Jed from getting Ezekiel? How could he, if he was dead?

Jed chuckled to himself. Here in Tennessee, folk didn't believe. . . .

More than a week passed before Jed again took his well-oiled shotgun from its place on the wall and started over the mountain. He was in no great hurry about Ezekiel—instead, he rather enjoyed waiting. Ezekiel was the last of the three Simmons brothers, and knowing that the foreigner was over there, and that he was going to kill him, gave life a curious sort of zest. . . . Likely the kid didn't even know who shot his brother. Jed laughed silently at the thought, adding to himself that the boy probably wouldn't do anything about it if he did know. He wasn't like the mountain people. . . .

But this morning all of Jed's impatience had returned. The sun shone hotly on the Tennessee hills, and raised an almost visible veil of vapor from the tiny branch which flowed through the hollow. Well, he'd waited long enough. With a grimace of distaste at the three-mile traipse across two mountains, Jed swung his gun over his shoulder and started down the slope.

When, an hour and a half later, he arrived at the small clearing which was the Simmons place, he was not as tired as he had expected to be. The nervous exhilaration of the man-hunt buoyed him up, made him tensely aware of things around him. He paused only a moment at the fringe of scrub oak that bordered the clearing; then, bending almost double, he sprinted a hundred feet to the grape-arbor.

Safe inside the leafy bower, Jed leaned his gun against a supporting post and looked about. Here the vines had been trained over a rude wooden lattice so that a thick wall and roof of leaves now effectively hid him from anyone outside.

Jed parted the leaves carefully and peered out. A hundred feet behind him was the low wall of forest he had just left; two hundred feet in front of him was the house—a rude two-room shack; two hundred feet beyond that the wall of the forest began again. Jed looked at the house more closely. There was no sign of movement, but the thin line of smoke which curled from the chimney told him that Ezekiel was inside, probably preparing his midday meal. With a sigh of contentment he sat down and leaned back closer to his gun, idly listening to the chatter of birds in the forest, and the rustling of the leaves in the arbor.

How long Jed sat there he did not know. He was suddenly aroused from a semi-stupor by the sound of a banging door. Startled into instant activity, he swung around to peer through the leaves. Ezekiel was leaving the house, swinging in his hand an empty water-bucket. Going to the spring, Jed reckoned. If so, his path would take him within fifty feet of the arbor. Jed gloated.

With hands suddenly unsteady, the man in the arbor laid his gun on the ground, the muzzle barely extending through the leaves. Why take a chance? He would wait—at fifty feet he couldn't miss.

Unmindful of his danger, Ezekiel came slowly down the path, bearing diagonally nearer to the arbor. . . . Jed suddenly wondered why he no longer heard the aimless chatter of birds in the forest, why the light wind no longer stirred the broad leaves above him. It was uncanny, this noonday quiet. Impatiently, he shook off the feeling.

"So I can't do it, Abner?" he whispered to the empty air, but somehow the words clutched at his throat, and he wished he hadn't said it. No matter, a few seconds now——

Jed cursed the trembling of his hands as he aimed. What was the matter with him? He could see Ezekiel's slender form now above the barrel of his gun; he nerved himself to pull the trigger. The top of his head suddenly gone cold, Jed dropped the gun and looked quickly around him. No, the day was bright as ever—yet he could have sworn. . . . Half-heartedly now, he picked up the gun to sight at the form which had already passed the nearest point. He had not been wrong! A black nebulous cloud hovered over the barrel of his gun and created the illusion of darkest night!

Shrieking a curse, Jed Tolliver leapt upright and pointed, not aimed, the gun at where Ezekiel should be. He snapped both triggers simultaneously, but as he fired something clutched at his arm, and the hot lead sizzled harmlessly through the air.

Shaking as with a chill, blind rage within him struggling with black fear, the mountaineer stood irresolutely within his leafy ambush. He was quickly aroused to activity by a loud report and the crash of lead against the wooden lattice. A sharp pain burned his left arm where one of the pellets had found its mark. Ezekiel had fled to the house and opened fire.

Without waiting to reload his gun, Jed crashed through the side of the bower and fled to the safety of the trees. As he entered, buckshot spattered harmlessly around him.

Safe within the sheltering growth, Jed halted to reload his gun.

"Damn you, Abner!" he shouted to the stunted oaks. "I'll get him yet!"

As he turned to go he thought he heard a low mocking laugh, but reasoned later that it was only a squirrel chattering a protest at the sound of his voice.

Jed reached home in a blue funk. The long tramp across the mountains in the early summer heat had melted away most of his fears, but his nerves were still badly shaken. Now that he could look at the incident in a sober light, he refused to credit his senses. As the distance between himself and the scene increased, he had come more and more to believe the occurrence an hallucination, brought on by the long walk through the heat. After all, he recalled, he had almost fallen asleep in the arbor while waiting for Ezekiel to appear. Perhaps he had dreamed part of it? . . .

However logical Jed believed his explanation, he did not again go near the Simmons place. Weeks passed. Always he promised himself that he would soon finish the task so ingloriously begun, but day by day he waited, until nearly three months had gone. At first he had feared Ezekiel had recognized him in those few seconds it had taken to sprint from the grape-arbor to the cover of the woods. Later, as he heard nothing of it, he decided he was safe from that side. The end came in an unexpected manner. One afternoon early in August Jed had walked to the village. He stayed longer than he had intended, and shadows were already growing long when he started home. Not wishing to be out later than necessary, he took a short-cut through the woods which would take him within a half-mile of the Simmons place.

The sun was setting as he entered the Simmons hollow, a half-mile below the house. He felt vaguely uneasy. Though he told himself he was not frightened, he found himself wishing for the protection of his gun. Nervously, his hand strayed to the hunting-knife stuck in his belt, and tested the keen edge.

Walking diagonally across the hollow, which was largely devoid of trees, he

turned aside to go around a cluster of young cedars which was directly in his path. Suddenly he drew back sharply. Again his hand tested the keen edge of that knife, but not this time from nervousness. Jed was not thinking now of defense.

Two hundred feet beyond the cedars, on the smooth unbroken grass floor of the hollow, was a man milking. His back was turned to the cedars, but Jed thought he recognized that slim youthful form. He believed it was Ezekiel.

Stepping lightly, one hand on his belt where he could immediately grasp the knife, Jed moved into the open. Halfway across the level space, his hand moved yet closer to the knife, while the ghost of a grin curved his lips. Without a doubt it was Ezekiel Simmons. The man milking did not look up. The milk jetted into the half-filled bucket with a low murmur, just loud enough to mask Jed's guarded footsteps.

Step by step Jed advanced. If only Ezekiel did not see him! If only the cow did not sense his presence and turn unexpectedly! Step by step further—Jed was tense with excitement. There was no midday sun this time to blind his eyes and fill his soul with a nameless fear. Nor would he be unnerved by the twilight stillness; it was always still at sunset, here in these mountains. . . .

Ten feet now. The milk still swished into the pail uninterruptedly, the steady grinding of the cow's molars never ceased.

Suddenly Jed tugged at his belt and leapt forward.

"Got you!" he shouted aloud.

But the exultant cry died suddenly into a moan of horror. The arm bearing the knife poised high for the blow, Jed felt something like an electric shock course through its length. Instead of swinging forward to strike the man in front of him, the knife turned in his hand, his wrist and elbow bent at a crazy angle, and the razor-edge steel ripped through the cords of his neck.

Staggered more by his realization of the awful consequences than by present pain, Jed sank to the grass, while gouts of blood spurted from a torn jugular. His first mad terror past, he became aware that Ezekiel was standing over him, scorn darkening his features.

"So it *was* you, Tolliver. Abner warned me—about you."

"I'd have got you too — only Abner——"

"Abner was a good brother. He told me—weeks before he died—that if anything happened, he'd—guard me."

Jed felt himself weaker. His head was strangely without weight, and objects around swam lazily in the pale twilight. He lay back on the grass.

"Should have got you, Ezekiel—shouldn't have—missed," he murmured sleepily as the shadows gathered.

He raised his head slightly to listen. Was that a light mocking laugh he heard in the grass beside him? He listened again, before the darkness came down. No—he could not be sure. . . .

The Teakwood Box

By JOHNS HARRINGTON

San Pedro Joe found the secret that was contained in that intricately carved Oriental box

"BETTER pay the cash," snarled sallow San Pedro Joe into the telephone mouthpiece. The speaker jerked his head to one side and glanced from the cramped phone booth into the almost-deserted drug store, checking to see whether his conversation had been heard. It was late afternoon—a sultry and stuffy summer day.

"That teakwood box don't mean much to me," Joe continued in a hoarse tone. "And if you want it pretty bad, I'll sell it—otherwise the thing gets chucked out, see?"

Mrs. Floyd Wright's tiny, ill-painted cottage in a smelly Los Angeles suburb had been ransacked a few days previously, leaving bedding overturned, furniture stuffings tumbling everywhere. The teakwood box, to the fidgety old woman, far overshadowed in importance the amount of cash and the few pieces of silver which had also been stolen. Oddly carved and strangely arresting, the prize had been a gift to Mrs. Wright from her husband, recently killed in a factory explosion where he had been night watchman. He had purchased the box during a vagabond trip to China in his boyhood days.

The teakwood container had never been opened by either Mrs. Wright or her husband. "Betty," he used to say while dozing in the parlor and studying the box, "that thing is jinxed, just like I was told. It's dangerous, leave it alone. There is a dreadful native curse on it.

"I got the box from a streetpeddler in Shanghai, who told me he bought it from a priest; he said there was a dire curse to anyone who opened the box, but that it would bring power and good luck to the owner as long as he did not try to do so. I always have said that the box was most likely stolen from a temple by the peddler, or by some other member of the street-scum parade," Wright would conclude.

It would have been difficult to open the box, even if someone did want to pry into it, because its lid was apparently operated by a complex series of springs and pivoting levers. The singularity of the object, its weirdness and strange delicacy, gave it a curious value. When it had been made and by whom—what exotic sights the container had witnessed—were unanswered queries which added to the living personality of the teakwood box. An evil power, dull and half asleep, yet again glowing, awakening, seemed inclosed within the meticulously decorated teakwood. Though the Wrights had been almost afraid of the box from the start, they had nevertheless believed that the spirit which might lie within it would not hurt them if they did not molest it, for they had lived good lives.

Some day, the spirit would awaken and strike, but it would not be at a time when they were about. Death, red, grinning, and yellow-fanged, was a part of the exotic treasure; it was not the death of God-fearing men and women, but the bloody, merciless deity of those who belonged in the realm of evil. The little wooden

ghouls which stuck forth from the sides appeared to be tireless, unearthly sentinels, waiting, watching for a suitable offering for their drooling master within.

The stick-bodied widow, shut off in a little corner impervious to the noisy streets around her, had prized the six-inch-high box much more than anything else she owned, because of the eccentric affection her husband had placed on it when he was alive. Though he always feared the box, he would sit and watch it for hours, without uttering more than a phrase. One time when his wife had returned from shopping, she found him standing in the little yard, blanched and trembling.

"Never, never, can we sell or dispose of that box!" he cried. "The devil inside told me so; if we did, he would do something horrible!"

Mrs. Wright wondered whether her husband had concentrated for so long on the object that his imagination had given him that message, but because of the frightened look in his eyes she accepted what he said and did not question him about it. Wright never spoke about the teakwood box after that, but he sat with it oftener than before; his face, rather than appearing curious, had a grim, hypnotized look as he gazed in silence upon the treasure.

Carefully dusted several times a week, and kept glistening with polish, the curio had rested in a place of honor on the living-room mantelpiece, where it sometimes glowed a mysterious, uncanny luster when a few stray rays of the sun penetrated to it from the curtained windows.

But Mrs. Wright could not comply with the ransom demands of the thief who had snatched it and realized the esteem placed on the box by its owner, because of the obvious care with which it was kept. The old woman was sniffling softly into a tiny, lace handkerchief which she clutched in thin, ivory-colored hands.

"One hundred and fifty bucks or nothin'!" sneered San Pedro Joe. These old people got on his nerves. They were so damned irritating and slow.

"But I can't—can't get that much money," trembled Mrs. Wright, her fingers tightening around the phone receiver.

"You're out of luck then, old woman," deridingly returned the thief, and hung up. Ordinarily, he would have dickered to get the best price possible for the stolen object, even though it was lower than he first demanded. But in this case, it gave him a feeling of satisfaction to crush brutally the faltering woman's happiness. San Pedro Joe slowly stepped out of the phone booth, and quickened his pace as he neared the store entrance. He spat at the curbing.

His pasty, selfish face was set off by thin, twisting lips. The black suit he wore was ill-kept, bulging in the wrong places. It was young Joe's habit to drum his fingers on any surface convenient when he was uneasy, and that was most of the time. His watery, cold blue eyes were continually shifting, weighing people he encountered. Joe specialized in robbing ill-kept, run-down homes; there was nearly always something worth his troubles, and then his victims seldom could afford to have much investigation concerning their losses. He was like a cunning spider feeding on bewildered, fluttering moths caught in his net.

In half an hour Joe arrived at his apartment, located in a battered, two-story stucco in the southwest part of Los Angeles. A brief stretch of yellow, dry grass ran between the sidewalk and the

plaster-chipped structure. Light from the disappearing sun was shining on the cheerless front windows. Leaving his poorly-kept coupé at the curb, he stepped quickly across the withered lawn and up the cement steps of the building to his rooms.

After a snack of cold beans and white bread, gulped with some warmed-over coffee, Joe brought the teakwood box out from the place where he had hidden it under the messy sink. Darkness had come and the moon had not yet risen. Billows of black, angry clouds were scattered in the sky. Putting the box on the kitchen table, he stood back and regarded the thing. It appeared ominous and resentful on the scarred table-top under the white ceiling light. Joe thought he sensed a feeling of unearthly life in the booty before him. Someone down the hall was coughing hoarsely, and the thief felt chilled.

Suddenly, Joe returned to himself and became intensely curious about that box. He considered what he had found out about it from Mrs. Wright, who, in her desire to get her treasure back, had breathlessly poured out the whole story when questioned. Maybe Mrs. Wright's old man had cached some precious stones or money in the container, conjectured Joe, and had fabricated the yarn about the curse in order to keep people from trying to open the box. The thief, flamed by his greed, decided the teakwood curio deserved an investigation before he discarded it.

At first, he picked up a hammer which was kept in one of the dish-closet drawers, but after a moment's consideration, he determined to try and open the box by its mechanism. Perhaps he could sell it to an antique-dealer after examining what might be inside. Yet had that been the real reason for his decision to use care? Joe wished that fool down the hall would keep quiet; for the first time in his life he felt uncertain, confused.

San Pedro Joe was proud of his ability to do a neat job on breaking into houses, opening strong-boxes, and his conceit prompted him again to forget his forebodings and test his skill by attempting to discover the combination of the box; otherwise, being increasingly nervous, he probably would not have taken the pains which he did to open it so carefully. His fingers trembled—he licked dry, swollen lips. After working for some minutes, he roughly pushed the box from him. Joe imagined the curse, the words of evil, an idol guardian might have incanted on the one who pried into the sacred box, for perhaps it contained some treasured jewels or a temple secret, rather than being simply a hiding-place for Wright's pennies.

The investigator eagerly, impatiently, bent over the shining teakwood again, as though suddenly possessed, and continued his manipulation of the curio's carved knobs and queer levers. For a moment, he thought he detected a slight, shrill cry, followed by a tiny, penetrating whistle. Sweat broke out on Joe's brow as he doggedly kept at his task, fascinated, now unable to pause. Shortly he pressed an unobtrusive bump which had been revealed by sliding a ghoulish little figure ornamenting the container's front to one side. The lid slowly raised upward, as though controlled by a hidden spring. The crook nervously pressed harder on the button he had discovered, in order to hasten the opening of the lid. He was waiting for something—his finger seemed frozen to the box, his whole body was stiffened. Sweat was trickling down his back, yet he was somehow cold.

Suddenly, a sharp, biting flame burned

in his thumb, as though he had put it in a fire of hot coals. A strange numbness ran through his arm. He stared down at the table to see a neatly-concealed needle, probably hollow, slowly retreating into the side of the box; in the same glance he saw that the teakwood curio was empty, contained nothing.

Blood was on his thumb, dripping from under the finger-nail, where seemed to be an inflamed, tiny wound. He heard a peculiar, spine-stiffening cackle, on the same penetrating high key as the whistle. First it came spasmodically, but broke down into a low gurgle, a sucking sound. The thief's heart seemed to bloat and swell, yet tried to beat faster; Joe clutched at his hot brow with clammy, weak hands.

Young San Pedro Joe, a short time ago successful light-finger man, fell dead on the kitchen floor. The white light shone on his ill-proportioned, slight body. For a moment, there seemed a slight rustling. A dirty, filth-incrusted window banged open. But all was quiet outside in the hot, choking night air.

To Howard Phillips Lovecraft

Master-writer of the weird, essayist, poet, 1890-1937

By FRANCIS FLAGG

He lived—and now is dead beyond all knowing
Of life and death: the vast and formless scheme
Behind the face of nature ever showing
Has swallowed up the dreamer and the dream.
But brief the hour he had upon the stream
Of timeless time from past to future flowing
To lift his sail and catch the luminous gleam
Of stars that marked his coming and his going
Before he vanished: yet the brilliant wake
His passing left is vivid on the tide
And for the countless centuries will abide:
The genius that no death can ever take
Crowns him immortal, though a man has died.

The Head in the Window

(Adapted from the German of Wilhelm von Scholz)

By ROY TEMPLE HOUSE

What strange prescience had the bearded man of his approaching death? An odd little story

IN THE art gallery of a North German city hangs a lurid oil painting which represents two Italians waylaying and attacking a third. I will tell you the history of the painting.

In the nineties of the last century, a young German painter was living in the outskirts of Rome, in an isolated little house surrounded by a vineyard. One fine, bright moonlight night, after sitting over the wine till a late hour with two or three friends down in the city, he came home about midnight. He had to walk some distance beyond the end of the street-car line, through a narrow road that ran between high walls. He never came through that lane late at night without a feeling of apprehension. He was a poor man, he never wore jewelry, his modest brown cape and dilapidated broad-brimmed hat were very much like the clothing of many of his modest neighbors, visibly not the appurtenances of a man of means, and he had had no love affairs in Rome; so that it did not seem as if any sort of ambush was likely. He thought a good deal about his fiancée back in Germany, and he almost always carried a letter from her in his left inside vest pocket, just over his heart. As he walked home he was in the habit of whistling to keep his courage up, of talking aloud to himself, bursting out every now and then with "That's certainly a fact!" or "Yes, I think that's what I'll do!" And he was likely to call out at intervals to his little dog, a Spitz who never strayed far from his master's heels. He always carried a revolver on his person, although in all the years since he had acquired it, he had never once had occasion to fire it off.

But when he came near his garden gate, he never failed to find himself shivering with apprehension till his slightly trembling fingers had the gate unlocked. He could almost visualize a big fellow gliding around the corner and stepping out threateningly in front of him. He always had his key in his hand before he had reached the gate, and he always pushed the key into the lock with nervous haste; on dark nights he would hold his lighted cigar toward the lock with the other hand. Then he would lock the gate behind him in a great hurry, unlock his house door just as nervously, light the candle which stood waiting for him to the left of the door on the uneven tile floor, try the door which led into the ground-floor rooms, all of them unoccupied except the kitchen and utilized as lumber-rooms to store his artist's supplies, and climb the creaking stairs to the upper floor where were located his spacious studio and his little bedroom. The bedroom was scarcely more than an alcove, and it always stood wide open into the studio, so that as he lay in bed he could see the great wide window and the starry heavens outside.

His trip home on this particular evening had not been without disquieting incidents. Nothing very definite had hap-

pened, and he might have attached no importance to anything that had occurred if he had not been made a little apprehensive by the eery turn the conversation in the artist group had taken. His Spitz had stopped and barked furiously into a linden-tree alley a few hundred yards from his garden gate. It was true that the dog had a nervous streak in him and often grew excited over nothing at all. A little earlier, as the artist was getting off the street-car, a very suspicious looking and acting man in ragged work-clothes had asked him how to reach the Valle San Giorgio, a lonely little valley with a chapel in the center of it, a sort of ravine which lay behind and below the eminence on which his house was built and which no human being in his senses would have thought of visiting at that hour of the night. Then, as he came through the narrow street between the high walls, he would have sworn he heard steps on the hard ground behind him. The impression was so strong that he turned and looked back more than once. But no one was visible, and it was only while he himself was walking that he seemed to hear the steps. They must have been only the echo of his own steps in the uncanny stillness of the night.

Finally, at a turn of the crooked little street, he had come suddenly within a few feet of a man who was going in the same direction, but more slowly. The man turned and looked at him, then walked slowly away on a path that branched off from the little street. The painter had had only an indefinite impression of the man's bearded face. But his artist eye had taken in the squat, heavy frame, which stood out plainly in the moonlight, the peculiar swing of the man's walk, and even the wavering shadow which showed rather distinctly on the wall beyond him before he turned into the foot-path. When he had himself come abreast the path and peered fearfully down it, the man had disappeared. There were no buildings along the path, and it was distinctly visible for some distance. It seemed as if the earth had swallowed the man. Or he might have dodged behind a clump of bushes. But why would he have done that? It was strange.

For a few minutes the young painter had been almost uneasy. Then all at once the artist in him had gained the upper hand. He realized that the shape and manner of the bearded pedestrian had been very much what he had had in mind for a figure in a violent night scene which he was planning to paint, and he regretted that he had not seen the man's face more distinctly. He began to lay plans for sketching what he remembered of the face and figure before he went to bed, and in his cheerful planning he completely forgot his apprehension—till his dog had begun to bark frantically at the entrance of the linden alley.

Arrived at home, the painter had hauled his preliminary sketch out of a corner, set it up on an easel and rapidly drawn in with charcoal the outlines of the man with the beard. He had originally planned to make this person the aggressor in an encounter. He had thought of him as rushing out from his concealment behind a wall and running with drawn sword at a favored rival who had just said good-bye to a lady at the gate of an imposing palazzo. But some mysterious influence seemed to guide him into a change of plan. He of the beard must needs be the victim, not the attacker, and he must be set upon by two men.

The painter took out a fresh sheet and sketched in the new idea. It was curious how definitely the impression had come to him. He knew exactly where to place each individual, how to direct each mo-

tion. But the face of the bearded defender, the man whose life was forfeit to these vicious assassins, would not come clear to him. Finally he grew tired of searching, undressed and went to bed. Tomorrow, he said to himself, when I am fresher, I shall be able to think the thing out better.

He went to sleep at once and slept soundly. But in the course of the night—he had no idea how long he had been asleep—he started up in bed with the definite impression that he had heard something, a call, a cry, or voices talking together. He listened. Complete silence. If he had heard anything, it must have been in his dream. It did seem to him as if he had had a dream, and that he had dreamed about something disturbing, something alarming. But he could not remember what the dream had been about. He was in the act of lying down again, when he glanced into his studio, which lay bathed in the moonlight from the great window. He saw his dog standing erect in the center of the room, his head thrust forward and turned toward the window, watching and listening intently, without barking. He had never seen the animal act like that before. The painter called softly. The dog gave no sign of hearing him. He did not change in the slightest his attitude of absorbed interest. Then the painter raised his eyes to the window.

At first it seemed to him as if he must be dreaming still. He threw the bedclothes aside, stared at the window, brushed his hands across his eyes and gazed again. There was no doubt about it. The painter's eyes were looking into the eyes of the bearded man whose conduct had puzzled him the night before. It looked as if the man had climbed up and stood on something that lifted him breast-high before the second-story window. The rough-boned, carelessly kept face with the tangled hair and beard was unmistakably the face he had caught a glimpse of on his way home a few hours before. It was frightfully distorted. The eyes were wide open and staring, the lips were open and drawn back from the teeth—it seemed almost as if the man were uttering a terrified cry for help, but not a sound was audible. On the left temple there was an ugly wound, with the hair matted over it but with the blood still trickling down over the face. There was no sign of the hands; the arms fell straight down from the shoulders. It almost seemed to the painter, as he studied the figure and its attitude a little more calmly, as if someone had pushed a dead man up into the window from below. Then, all at once, the horrible apparition disappeared, noiselessly, and the painter saw the trees and the quiet sky behind and above them.

At that moment the dog's muscles relaxed from his position of tense watchfulness. He ran to his master, cowered against him as if he were seeking protection, turned his head back toward the window. Then he sat down expectantly before the painter, exactly as he was in the habit of doing when he saw the artist take down his hat and his caped cloak to go out.

For a moment the distracted artist could do nothing but stare at the rectangle of moonlight where the ghastly figure had been. Then he realized the changed attitude of the dog, and spoke to the animal. When the little creature saw that he had his master's attention, he stood up, wagged his tail, and looked around expectantly toward the stairway. The artist took his revolver and went to the window. The moonlit landscape was calm and silent. Not a sight or a sound.

If a gang of assassins had held a murdered man up to his window, a minute or two before, they could scarcely have made so complete a get-away in so short a time. The shutters on the window below were closed and locked. There was nothing to climb up by. And except for the feeling that he had heard something in his dream, the painter was sure that not a sound had reached him from outside the building.

The dog ran back and forth between the artist and the stairway. Animals have remarkable leadings, and the painter thought seriously of making the round of the garden. But it seemed to him, as he thought it over, that such a procedure would be useless at best, and that at worst it would be courting trouble. If bandits were about, what could one timid citizen, armed with an old revolver that had never been fired in its life, do against them? All that could be expected of him, certainly, was to watch from inside his house till morning. He closed his window, and ordered the dog back to his cushion.

Just before he drew the window down, he had had the impression that he heard steps run rapidly along the stone pavement that lay just below it. He raised it again, and looked down. No one was in sight, and not a sound was to be heard. He stood by the window, struggling to get a grip on himself. He wondered if he could be ill. He knew that various delusions come from physical causes within the one who experiences them. He had tried so desperately hard to visualize the head which he needed for his picture, that his effort, combined with the effect of the heavy Falerno wine he had drunk, might easily have produced a psychic effect which caused him to see visions and hear sounds that had transpired only in his imagination. He had almost convinced himself that he had found the key to the enigma, when his glance fell on his dog, obediently crouching on his cushion, but still wide-eyed and excited. It seemed to him exactly as if someone spoke out from right behind him: "But what about the dog? Does your psychopathic theory explain the way the dog is acting?"

Suddenly the painter's mood of anxiety and puzzlement gave way to one of impatience. He was tired and nervous. He was disgusted with the whole annoying affair. He dropped on his bed again, and in a mood of something like defiance, he flung off the perplexity and dropped into a heavy sleep.

NOTHING happened till morning. When the bright sun shone into the window instead of the ghostly moon, he was ready to laugh the whole matter off as a half-tipsy dream, and to class the dog's strange conduct with various other evidences of unaccountable nervousness which that animal had shown at various times. He sat down at his easel and went seriously to work at his new sketch. He discovered that he knew the bearded face now, feature by feature, and the task went smoothly. It was marvelous how vividly the face and form of the heavy fellow came out under the artist's eager fingers. This would be his best picture, he was sure of that.

As he was working, he heard somebody knock at the door downstairs. He made a few rapid strokes still, hastily kicked off his slippers and pulled on his shoes, and went down. It was doubtless the peasant woman, he thought, who brought him his milk every morning, but who brought it at the most unaccountably irregular hours. If she wasn't willing to follow a fairly even schedule, there was no reason why he should discommode himself to keep her from waiting a minute or two.

When he opened the door, there was no woman there, and no milk-can. He strolled down the walk toward the fountain at which the milk-woman often stopped to water her donkey. As he came near the fountain he heard voices. When he passed the clump of bushes that had hidden the place from his sight, he discovered an excited group arguing and gesticulating about some object which lay on the ground. There were two policemen in the group.

"Has something happened?" he inquired as he joined the circle.

"They killed a man last night," said one of the bystanders. One of the policemen asked the painter if he had seen or heard anything that might throw any light on the mystery. He was about to tell his ghost-story, when it occurred to him how improbable it was, and he contented himself with replying that as he had walked home late at night a man in front of him had turned into the little side path, and that before he had left the street-car, a man had asked the way to the Valle San Giorgio.

"Would you know the man in front of you if you saw him again?"

The painter was not sure. But he thought he remembered certain things about him. For example, he remembered very distinctly that the man had a beard.

The policeman looked up quickly. "Is this the man?" he asked, and drew off the sack which had covered the head of the prostrate form.

The painter started back in terror, and for a moment his voice failed him completely. There was the head he had seen in the window, the eyes still staring wide, the matted hair clinging about the wound over the left temple, the wild, scraggly beard. The look of anguish and appeal was still in the eyes that gazed up into the eyes of the painter, as if the deed were not yet committed and the man were begging him to come to his aid. And as the living man gazed with fascinated horror into the eyes of the dead man, the expression of the eyes seemed to change to one of reproach. The little dog had been ready and anxious to dash out and help defend the victim of a band of assassins, but his master had been too stupid, too selfish, too cowardly to come to the succor of a fellow-being in distress.

The painter recovered his self-control and said dully to the policeman:

"Yes, I think that was the man."

"Did you know him?" asked one of the neighbors with whom the German painter had a bowing acquaintance. And when the painter shook his head, the voluble Italian prattled on:

"It is much better that the bandits made away with this man than if they had killed a gentleman like you. He was——"

And he touched his finger compassionately to his forehead.

From the general discussion that followed, the artist learned that the dead man, who for a good part of his life had been a shepherd in the Alban Hills, was a strange dreamer of a fellow who claimed to have the gift of second sight, to be able to foretell the future, and to have the power to cure disease by prayer. Members of the group told various stories of strange proofs of his psychic powers, notably of one instance in which he had described in great detail a fire which was raging at that same moment in a town a hundred miles away, and of which he had no possible means of knowledge.

"It is strange," said one of the neighbors thoughtfully, "that he didn't foresee what would happen to him when he came out here last night!"

"Perhaps he *did* foresee it," said one

of the policemen, who had been looking through a handful of papers which had come from one of the dead man's pockets. Among these papers, many of them old and worn from long friction in the pocket, was a clean sheet on which was printed out very carefully: "I AM GOING A HARD WAY. PERHAPS I SHALL NOT COME BACK. BUT I AM SAVING ANOTHER MAN'S LIFE."

THE murderers were caught a few days later. They were two vagabonds of known evil habits, both of whom had already served prison sentences. When they were examined, they confessed that they had intended to kill the painter and plunder his isolated house at their leisure, but that in their excitement they had mistaken one man for another who was dressed very similarly. They had intended, they said, to break into the studio that same night, but had been so frightened when the dying shepherd had called their attention to their blunder and had warned them solemnly never to carry out their murderous plan against the painter, that they had taken to their heels in a panic.

And so it comes that the picture of the half-crazy Italian shepherd who saved the life of the young German painter is hanging today in a German art gallery.

The Girl From Samarcand*

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

AS HER guest set the dainty bone china cup on the onyx-topped, teak tabouret and sank back among the embroidered cushions, Diane knew to the syllable the words which were to filter forth with the next breath of smoke; for three years as Hammersmith Clarke's wife had convinced her that that remark was inevitable.

"My dear, where did you ever get those perfectly gorgeous rugs?"

And Diane, true to form, smiled ever so faintly, and luxuriated in the suspicion of a yawn: the ennui of an odalisk hardened to the magnificence of a seraglio

* From WEIRD TALES for May, 1929.

carpeted with an ancient Feraghan rug, and hung with silken witcheries from the looms of Kashan. Diane saw the wonder permeate her friend's soul and heard it surge into words.

"The rugs? Why—well, I married them along with Ham, you might say. Yes, they are rather pretty, aren't they? But they're an awful pest at times——"

"Naturally," agreed Louise, who lived in a loft in the Pontalba Building, where she could look down into the Plaza where Jackson reins in his brazen horse and lifts his brazen hat in salutation to the French Quarter of New Orleans. "You simply couldn't let the maid clean——"

"Maid? Lord help us, but I daren't touch them myself! I tried it, once. That heaven-sent prayer-rug" — Diane indicated an ancient Ghiordes, a sea-green splendor worth more than his right eye to any collector—"looked a bit dingy. And Ham caught me at it. What was left of my hair just fell short of a close shingle. Do you know, one day I caught him filling the bathtub with milk——"

"What?"

"Precisely. Seems some expert claimed a milk bath improves the luster. So the little Bokhara—that blood-red creature beneath your feet—got a treatment fit for a Circassian beauty. I'm just waiting for him to bring home a duster of bird-of-paradise plumes for this venerable wreck."

Diane stroked what was left of the peachblow, sapphire and gold nap of an age-old Senna woven on a silken warp.

"The truth of it is," continued Diane, "I feel guilty of bigamy. The man was married to his rugs long before he ever met me. 'Member how we speculated on the pros and cons of polygamy the other day at Arnaud's? Well, here I am, one lone woman competing with a dozen odd favorites, and a new rival added to the harem every so often."

"Good lord, Diane, what next! You are unique. Why, one would think you were jealous of them."

"Well, I am!"

"Outlandish as that fantastic husband of yours. I don't know which is the more *outré*, his mania for these beautiful things with the impossible names, or your—heavens above, it does really seem like resentment against them. Now, if you'd married Peter"—Louise laughed metallically—"he'd never have given you time to be jealous of a *rug*."

"That's just it," flared Diane, "I could forgive flirtations and black eyes, and a reasonable degree of non-support. But these damned rugs—look at that!"

Diane dug her cobraskin toe into the closely worn nap of the Feraghan carpet.

"Look at it! Just a rug, the first time. But live with it day after day. See the witchery sparkling in it at sunset. Catch yourself losing yourself in the thrill of its three hundred years, wondering that all the ecstasy ever lost in the entire world could be imprisoned in a rug. Then see your one and only and otherwise adequate husband sitting of an evening, hours at a stretch, staring at it and dreaming of all the richness and glamor he's lost through becoming civilized, learning to wear shoes, and having only one woman, and she his wife, about the house. Yes, I called you up to have you listen to me get the indignation out of my soul. The truth of it is, Lou, that if I don't get out of this atmosphere soon, I'll go utterly mad. Some day I'm going to move in on you in your attic—anything to get away from all this!"

"Do you mean to say," began Louise with wide-spaced deliberation, "that you'd actually leave Ham because he likes to mess and poke round with his rugs,

and spend most of his waking moments talking about them? Honestly, now——"

"Good Lord, I could stand his *talking* about them. But"—Diane shuddered—"Lou, he *loves* them. Sits there, transfigured, like a saint contemplating the dewdrop glistening in the lotus cup."

"When I suggested, over at the Iron Gate, that you move in with me, I didn't know that you were married—they all called you *la belle Livaudaise,* and you were the life of everything—and least of all, I never suspected anyone had you enshrined in magnificence like this. Better think it over, Di—I've been through the mill, and I *know.*"

DIANE from the first had been fascinated by the exotic atmosphere in which Clarke had planted her after their marriage; but in the end, seeing how they had become a part of him, she half consciously hated them and their everlasting song of Bokhara and Herat of the Hundred Gardens: an unheard song to which Clarke listened, and replied in unspoken syllables. And thus it was that Diane learned that to live in Clarke's apartment would be to become an accessory to those precious fabrics that were his hard-ridden hobby; for no woman would fit into the dim, smoky shadows of that titled salon unless bejeweled and diaphanously veiled she could dance with curious paces and gestures beneath the sullen glow of the great brazen mosque lamp as became the favorite of a khan in far-off Tartary. From the very beginning, Diane fought to keep her individuality untainted by the overwhelming personality of those damnably lovely fabrics from Shiraz and the dusty plains of Feraghan.

And Diane was right; for they dreamed, those old weavers, of the roses of Kirman, of the evening star that danced on the crest of Mount Zagros, of dancing girls in the gardens of Naishapur, of fountains that sprayed mistily in the moonlit valley of Zarab-shan; and all this they wove into what we now learn to catalogue as Sixteenth Century Persian, or whatever our best guess may be. Into his masterwork the weaver wove his soul; so that whoever lives with one of those imperishable sorceries that come out of the East must in the end feel its presence unless he be somewhat duller than the very wood of the loom on which it was woven.

Look upon wine as often as you wish, but beware of a Bokhara when it is red—red as the blood of slaughter—red as the embers of a plundered city—a redness charged with the quartered octagons of Turkestan—for in the end you will become enslaved to the silky splendor that once graced the tent floor of a Tekke prince. . . .

Diane was right; though Diane never suspected, even dimly, what in the end really did happen to Hammersmith Clarke. For, naturally enough, neither she nor anyone else saw or heard the Yellow Girl; that is, no one but Clarke: and he saw and heard too much.

Had she suspected—but she couldn't have. For who would imagine Fate riding to the crossroads in a truck of the American Express Company? It just isn't done; not until one looks back and sees that it could have happened in no other way.

But unheard-of things happen in Turkestan; and while one may pause for an evening's glamor beside some moonkissed fountain in the valley of Zarab-shan, and then march on, forgetting, there is that which does not forget, being undying and everlasting; so that though forgotten, it reaches forth across time and space, not only clinging to the pile of a

rug from Samarcand, but resorting even to express trucks to carry it the last step toward capturing the forgetful one. . . .

All this Diane knew without knowing why she knew: and it seemed so reasonable that there was nothing incongruous in shuddering and saying as she often had, "I'm afraid of the damned things. . . ."

As THE DOOR clicked behind the departing expressman, Clarke clipped the leaden seals of the cylindrical bale, cut its stitching, and thrilled at the thought of the rug he was about to unwrap; for the bale was from Siraganian of New York, who by dint of persistent reaching into the East must finally have succeeded in executing Clarke's impossible order.

A tawny, golden silkiness smiled from the gaping burlap sheath.

Just a glimpse of that wonder in buff and cream, with its lotus-bud border, and frets and meanders in blue and coral and peach, told Clarke that this of all things was as far as possible from what he had ordered Siraganian to get, cost what it might. For in place of Persian intricacies in deep wine reds and solemn green, florid magnificence that Isphahan had given to the world before the splendor died, Clarke was confronted by an ancient rug from Samarcand—silken Samarcand in the valley of Zarabshan—thick-napped and luxurious, mysterious with its Mongolian cloud bands and asymmetrical corner pieces, bats and dragons, and five-medallioned firmaments of blue that could come from none but the vats of Turkestan.

"Good God! It's silk!" marveled Clarke as he stroked the lustrous pile. "Silk, and by the Rod, on a linen warp!"

He wondered how Siraganian could have made that incredible mistake, sending him such a rug in place of what he had ordered. If it were a case of sending something just as good—an unheard-of procedure with that Armenian merchant-prince—he certainly had been crafty enough, for no connoisseur who once touched that rich pile, whose eyes were once dazzled by those insinuant colors, whose senses were stricken by the sorcery of cabalistical designs, could ever return it and say that he had ordered something else. Rather would he thank Siraganian for his error.

A silk pile on a warp of blue linen, and woven in the days when Persian Hafiz was called to account by that fierce Mongol for a verse wherein the poet bartered the prince's favorite cities, Samarcand and Bokhara, for the smile of a *Turki* dancing girl, and the mole on her left breast: unbelievable fortune had sent him this incredible rug.

And then Clarke's wondering, triumphant eyes clouded as he thought of a girl beside whom Samarcand and Bokhara were but the tinkle of brazen anklets—a very long time ago, when there was no Diane, when Clarke pursued rugs for that same Siraganian who now sought them for Clarke.

"Egher an Turki bedest ared dili mara," muttered Clarke, forgetting all but the glamorous perils that had lured him far into lost cities and high adventure. Hafiz was right.

And for a moment the rug from Samarcand, its five by seven feet of tawny, silken perfection putting to confusion the priceless Feraghan on which it had been unrolled, gleamed unregarded as Clarke's mind whirled to the sonorous accent with which the divine Hafiz had enslaved the East and its savage conquerors.

"Egher an Turki——"

Strange, how after all this time one would remember. It must be that one could never quite forget.

The telephone rang; but Clarke ignored it until the jangling became too insistent, when he muffled the bell with several towels and a small cushion.

"Too bad," he apologized, as he took the cord from his lounge robe and completed the throttling of the almost stifled annoyance, "but I simply can't be disturbed."

In which he was wrong: for to contemplate that wonder from Samarcand was more disturbing than any voice that could creep in over the wire. He fingered the rings of dull, hand-hammered gold that were sewed to one of the salvaged sides; he wondered what palace wall had been enriched by that precious fabric—and with it all came the knowledge that that very rug had been a part of his own past. The life that had been knotted into its pile and the sorcery that had been woven into its pattern were speaking to one of Clarke's forgotten selves. Yet he was certain that he had never before seen it; for one could never have forgotten such as this, though seen but for an instant. Truly, the *rug* was a stranger, but the presence that accompanied it was demanding recognition.

In the meanwhile, Diane tired of hearing the operator's "They don't answer," and abandoned her efforts to remind Clarke of an engagement.

"I wonder," she mused, as she finally set aside the useless telephone, "what deviltry my *bien aimé* is devising."

And then she sought the rendezvous unattended, and made the customary apologies for Clarke's unaccountable absence.

He might have retreated into that dusky inner kingdom which from the very beginning he had held against Diane—a silence into which he plunged unaccompanied, not lacking appreciative company, but loving solitude and electing seclusion rather than the sharing of the fancies that twisted and the thoughts that writhed in his strange brain.

As Diane made her well-rehearsed apologies and frothed behind her vivacious mask, Clarke noted the manila envelope that was fastened to the web of the rug from Samarcand, and addressed to him: a letter, doubtless from Siraganian.

"We regret," wrote the Armenian, "that thus far we have had no success in finding at any cost a rug of the weave you ordered. However, we take pleasure in forwarding you this rug which a caravan stopping at Meshed left with our agent in that city with instructions to forward it to our New York office and thence to you. We are pleased that your agent saw fit to use our facilities for forwarding it to you, and wish to congratulate you on having obtained such a priceless specimen. Should you at any time care to dispose of it, be so kind as to give us an option on it, for we are in a position to offer you a better price than any dealer or collector in the United States. . . ."

The rug itself was improbable enough—but Siraganian's letter! An insoluble riddle. It couldn't be a jest. Then who——?

True enough, Colonel Merbere's expedition must have passed through Samarcand, Yarkand, and Kashgar on its way into the unknown stretches of Chinese Turkestan; but his acquaintance with the colonel was slight, and he had no friend in the colonel's train. And what obscure acquaintance of the "wish you were here" post-card banality would send a rug which in the old days served as a gift from one prince to another?

Diane's arrival cut the thread of fancy.

"Oh, Ham, but it *is* gorgeous," enthused *la belle Livaudaise* as she entered the roseate duskiness of Clarke's studio. And to herself, "Another rival. . . ."

Then she rehearsed the excuses she had offered for Ham's absence, and hoped he'd absent-mindedly contradict her the first time he deigned to speak for himself. That done, one must consider the latest addition to the seraglio.

Clarke detailed the story of the rug and its riddle.

"But who in the world would send you such a gift?" wondered Diane.

"Exactly no one, *très chère.*"

"Unless," Diane pointed out, "it might be one of your lost loves in those Asiatic playgrounds you've never entirely left."

Clarke laughed, but his derision was unconvincing, and Diane knew that he had been deep in the blacknesses of Asian nights; knew that her arrival had been an intrusion, that he was but a friendly stranger, babbling to her, a friendly stranger, of loveliness whose intoxication forced him to speak of it to anyone, even her.

The others were bad enough, with their everlasting song of Bokhara, and Herat of the Hundred Gardens—an unheard song to which Clarke listened, and replied in unspoken syllables; they were bad enough, they, and those monstrous fancies which at times he smilingly expressed with deliberate vagueness, but this yellow witch from Samarcand——

DIANE knew that more than a rug had emerged from that bale whose burlap winding-sheet still littered the floor.

At last it seemed that she was intruding on a *tête-à-tête,* eavesdropping on a monologue; so that when Clarke would emerge from his reveries, Diane resented the inevitable thought that he was robbing himself to keep her company. But patience reaches its limit, finally. . . .

She saw it, one night, twinkle and smile through a lustrous haze that played over its surface, smile the slow, curved smile of a carmine-lipped woman through the veils of her mystery; saw Clarke sitting there, eyes shearing the veil and half smiling in return, a devotee in the ecstatic contemplation of a goddess shrouded in altar fumes. . . .

"Ham!"

"Yes," answered Clarke's lips. He had now perfected the trick of having his body act as his proxy.

"Are you taking me to that show tonight?"

"What show?" Clarke the simulacrum stirred lazily in the depths of the cushion-heaped lounge. "The truth of it is, my dear," he resumed after a pause during which some memory of the proposed entertainment must have returned, "truth of it is I'm awfully busy tonight——"

"Busy sitting there staring at nothing and sipping Pernod!" flared Diane, the wrath of months flashing forth. Then, as she saw Clarke settle back into the depths: "Listen, once for all: this nonsense has lasted too long. I might as well have married a mummy! Either get that thing out of the house, or I'll leave you to your pious meditations indefinitely——"

"What? Good Lord, Diane, what's this?"

"You heard me. You used to be half human, but now you're utterly impossible. And if you can't show me a little attention, I'm leaving here and now. For the past many weeks you've acted like a model for a petrified forest. Ever since that yellow beast——"

"Yellow beast?"

"Exactly! That damned rug is driving me crazy——"

"Is, or has driven?" suggested Clarke.

"Lies there like a beast of prey just ready to wake. And you sit there, night after night, staring at it until you fall asleep in your chair. Does it go, or do I?"

"What do you want me to do? Throw it away?"

"I don't care what you do with it. Only I won't stay in the house with it. It gives me the creeps. You've said entirely too much in your sleep lately—first yellow rugs, and now it's a yellow girl. I'm through!"

Clarke's brows rose in Saracenic arches. And then he smiled with surprizing friendliness and a touch of wonder.

"Di, why didn't you tell me sooner? I could understand your craving alligator pears at 3 in the morning—I might have understood that, but hating a rug is really a new one on me——"

"No, stupid, it's nothing like that! I just hate the damned thing, and no more to be said."

"Well, lacking the infallible alibi"—Clarke glared and assumed his fighting face—"if you mean I choose between you and the rug, I'll call a taxi right now."

"Don't bother. I'll walk."

The door slammed.

Clarke twisted his mustache, and achieved a laugh; not merry, but still a laugh. And then he sank back among the cushions.

"Yellow Girl, I thought *you* were fantastic. . . ."

LE VIEUX CARRE wondered when the next morning it was rumored that *la belle Livaudaise* had been seen hurrying down Saint Peter Street without speaking to any one of the several acquaintances she had met; but when at the Green Shutter and the Old Quarter Bookstore it was announced that Diane was living in a loft of the Pontalba Building, wonder ceased. For Diane's friend Louise had been no less garrulous than she should have been, so that the habitués of the French Quarter were prepared for the news.

And then it was said that to gain admittance to Clarke's studio one must know the code of taps whereby someone who at times left a certain side door bearing bottles of Pernod announced his arrival; for Clarke answered neither doorbell nor telephone. The vendor of Pernod was certainly a discreet person; yet even a discreet seller of absinthe could see no harm in mentioning that his patron found enormous fascination in watching the play of sunlight and the dance of moonbeams on the golden buff pile of a rug that was more a sleeping, breathing creature than any sane child of the loom.

Finally the courier failed to gain admittance, despite his tapping in code. And this he thought worthy of Diane's ear.

"He starves himself, *petite*—since three days now he has not admitted me. All the while she lies there, gleaming in the moon, that awful rug—*mordieu,* it is terrible. . . ."

Diane had stedfastly denied that which had been clamoring for recognition. But when this last bit was added to what had gone before, logic gave way, and Diane's fears asserted themselves. That rug *was* haunted, *was* bewitched, *was* bedevilling Clarke; logic or no logic, the fact was plain.

Driven by that monstrous thought, Diane exhumed the little golden keyring and started up Royal Street, determined to cross the barrier before it became impassable. But her determination wavered; and before fitting the well-worn key into the lock, she applied her ear to the keyhole, listened, and heard Clarke's voice.

Diane resisted the temptation to use her key and stage a scene that even in the imperturbable Vieux Carré would be sensational for at least a week. Then her pride conquered, and she achieved a most credible smile of disdain.

"Sly devil, pretending it was a rug he was so absorbed in. . . ."

And, since it was but an amorous escapade, Diane's unbelievable speculations were replaced by thoughts reasonable enough not to be terrifying.

THAT very night, Clarke was sitting cross-legged on the floor of his studio, full under the red glow of a tall bronze mosque lamp. Before him, shimmering in the moonlight that streamed in through the French windows, lay the rug from Samarcand, mysterious and golden, with its pale sapphire corner pieces glittering like a distant sea viewed through a cleft between two mountain crests.

All the witchery and ecstasy that had ever been lost in the entire world were reassembled, pulsing in the silken pile which he contemplated. And this was *the* night, the Night of Power, when Fate stalked through the corridors of the world like a colossus just risen from an age-old throne of granite, resistless and unconquerable. Clarke had spent so many nights and days of staring that it was inevitable that there must be such a night. He saw more than the wonder before him: in place of the marvel woven by deft, forgotten hands, there gleamed enchantingly as through moon-touched mist a garden in the valley of Zarab-shan.

Then came a faint, oddly accented drumming and piping, music to whose tune dead years reassembled their bones and danced forth from their graves. And their ghosts as they danced exhaled an overwhelming sweetness that made Clarke's brain reel and glow, and his blood surge madly in anticipation of that which he knew must follow.

Then out of the blackness just beyond the range of the ruddy mosque lamp and full into the moonlight that marched slowly across the rug came a slim Yellow Girl, diaphanously garbed and veiled. Her anklets clicked faintly; and very faint was the tinkle of the pendant that adorned her unusual coiffure.

"All these many days I have sought you, my lord," she began, as she extended her arms in welcome. "But in vain, until tonight, when at last I parted the veil and crossed the Border."

Clarke nodded understandingly, and looked full into her dark, faintly slanted eyes.

"And I have been thinking of you," he began, "ever since someone sent me this rug on which you stand. It is strange how this rug could bridge the gap of twenty years and bring into my very house a glimpse of the valley of Zarab-shan. And stranger yet that you could escape from your father's house and find me here. Though strangest of all, time has not touched you, when by all reason you should be old, and leathery, and past forty. . . . Yet you are lovelier now than you were then, by that fountain in a garden near Samarcand."

"It is not strange," contradicted the Yellow Girl, as she pirouetted with dainty feet across the moon-lapped silk. "For you see me now as I was when I wove my soul into this very rug."

Clarke smiled incredulously: which was illogical enough, since, compared with the girl's presence, nothing else should be incredible.

"How can that be, Yellow Girl, seeing that we two met one evening twenty years ago, whereas this rug was woven when the Great Khan sat enthroned in Samarcand and reproved the Persian Hafiz for his careless disposal of the Great Khan's favorite cities. This was the joy of kings hundreds of years before you and I were born——"

"Before the *last* time we were born," corrected the Yellow Girl. "But the first time—at least, the first time that I can

(Please turn to page 376)

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The Girl From Samarcand

(Continued from page 374)

recollect—the barred windows of a prince's palace failed to keep you from me. And eunuchs with crescent-bladed simitars likewise failed. But in the end—why must all loveliness have an end?—a bowstring for me, and a sword-stroke for you. . . ."

The Yellow Girl shuddered as she stroked her smooth throat with fingers that sought to wipe off the last lingering memory of a cord of hardspun silk.

"And from the first," continued the girl, "I knew what our doom would be. So I started weaving, and completed my task before they suspected us and the bowstring did its work. My soul, my self, being woven cunningly and curiously into silk rich enough to hang on the wall of the khan's palace, waited patiently and wondered whether you and I could have our day again. Thus it was in the beginning——"

"Ah . . . now it does come back to me," interrupted Clarke, "as in a dream dimly remembered. How compactly and stiflingly they would wrap me in a bale of silk and carry me past the guards and into your presence. And by what devious routes I would leave you . . . yes, and how painlessly swift is the stroke of a simitar. . . ."

The Yellow Girl shuddered.

"A simitar truly wielded is really nothing, after all," continued Clarke. "I might have been sawn asunder between planks. . . . Well, and that meeting in the garden these short twenty years ago was after all not our first . . . it seems that I knew then that it was not the first. Though but for an evening——"

"Yes. Just for an evening. So to what end were we spared bowstrings and the stroke of swift simitars, since we had but an evening?" And thinking of the empty years of luxurious imprisonment that followed, she smiled somberly. "For only an evening. And then you forgot, until this rug—this same rug I wove centuries ago—interrupted your pleasant adventuring, and reminded you.

"Death stared me in the face. The end of life more vainly lived than the first. I knew that I was leaving this avatar after having lived but one stolen evening. So I sent a trusted servant to carry this very rug to Meshed. For when we met in the garden, you were hunting rugs for him who now seeks them for your delight. And I knew that he would find you if you still lived. Thus it is that I have crossed the Border, and stand before you as I did once before—this time on that very rug which I wove centuries ago, while living in hope of another meeting and in dread of the bowstring I knew would in the end find me."

The moon patch had marched toward the end of the rug from Samarcand, and was cutting into the blue web at its end. Clarke knew that when there remained no more room for her tiny feet, she would vanish, not ever to reappear. But Clarke hoped against knowledge.

"Yellow Girl," he entreated, "my door will be barred to friend and acquaintance alike, if you will but return on whatever nights the moon creeps across our rug. . . ."

Had Diane, listening at the door, understood, she would have used her key. But Diane merely heard:

"And I shall wait for these nights as long as life remains in me. For all that has happened since then is nothing and less than nothing; and all has been a dream since that one night in a garden of Zarab-shan."

Very little remained of the moon

patch. The Yellow Girl stepped a tiny pace forward, to prolong her stay yet another few moments. All but the moonlit strip of the rug from Samarcand glowed bloodily in the flare of the brazen mosque lamp.

"No, forgetful lover," chided the Yellow Girl, "I can not return. I can not cross the Border again. In Samarcand, eight hundred years ago we mocked for a while the doom that hung over us, and in the end called the bowstring but a caress of farewell. Again, in the garden of Zarab-shan we met, we parted, and you forgot: so this time I take no chances. While I can not return, you at least can follow me . . . if you will . . . for it is very easy. . . ."

She edged along the ever narrowing strip of moon-bathed silk, and with an embracing gesture, lured Clarke to rise and follow her.

"It is so easy . . . move lightly . . . but be careful not to disturb your body or overbalance it. . . ."

Had Diane not turned away from the door, were she not even now strolling insouciantly down Royal Street——

"Yellow Girl, you and I have had enough of farewells!"

Something left Clarke, tottered perilously on the two handbreadths of moonlight that remained, then caught the Yellow Girl by the hand and took the lead.

The blue web of the rug from Samarcand gleamed for another moment in the moonlight, then sweltered in the red glow of the mosque lamp.

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A new thriller by SEABURY QUINN appears in WEIRD TALES every month

THE enthusiastic reception of Seabury Quinn's story, *Roads*, in our January issue, has encouraged us to print further off-the-trail stories from time to time in this magazine. This story was a reverent tale of the Crucifixion, a hetaera from the house of Mary of Magdala, and Santa Claus. Though there were a few dissident voices of those who thought the Santa Claus element childish, the chorus of praise made the vote overwhelming in its favor.

Suited to a T

William F. Zuckert, Jr., of Washington, D. C., writes: "After ten years as a silent reader of WT, I take this opportunity to drop a line to the Eyrie. As a whole, I can find little or no criticism against our magazine, because personally it suits me to a T. Besides, on the very rare occasions when I do have an infinitesimal gripe, I say nothing because I realize that there must have been plenty of readers who did enjoy the piece; who am I to yelp? I like the high literary quality of the tales, with that subtle horror that sort of sneaks up on one. Now for a couple of orchids to the authors. In the December issue, I particularly enjoyed *The Sea-Witch* by Nictzin Dyalhis. In my humble estimation, this yarn constitutes one of the smoothest bits that I've ever read. It didn't hold a dull moment nor an arid paragraph from beginning to end. This letter would be incomplete without a mention of my favorite author and character. I refer, of course, to Seabury Quinn with his inimitable Jules de Grandin—a grand pair whose adventures I hope to be able to follow as long as these old eyes can see the printed page. *Flames of Vengeance* in the December issue was grand, but when the January issue came out with *Roads*, I got a real sock! What a story! I was almost on the last page before it dawned on me just who Claudius really was! That idea was a real inspiration, and you gave it to us at exactly the proper time of year. Keep up the good work, Mr. Quinn, and I can personally guarantee you at least one family of very avid readers. I could go on for pages extolling the virtues of the various authors, but that isn't very practical, because perhaps you would like to squeeze in a letter from some other reader. So I close now with a big cheer for Virgil Finlay. And thanks for listening."

The Light Was Green

Richard F. Behm writes from Los Angeles: "Thank you for John Speer's story, *The Light Was Green*. A long time has passed since I have read any fiction as unusual and fascinating as the stories written by Mr. Speer. It is very evident he does not write until he is definitely sure of the ground from which his inspiration for his story sprung."

A Letter from Miss Hemken

Gertrude Hemken writes from Chicago: "*Roads!* This is by far the loveliest Christmas story I have ever read. Quinn couples the Teutonic legends of the Nativity so beautifully. But one thing wonders me—Klaus, after a tricennium, still had the fair hair and beard; yet the Santa Claus we know is a white-haired, white-bearded old fellow. 'Course after two thousand years most anyone would grow gray, but—never mind. Somehow or other I was a mite disappointed in Dorothy Quick this time. Her witch was somehow so very like another enchantress in a w.-k. story by an equally w.-k. author. I really don't care for these supple sirens and their frightening powers. Give me a couple of rip-snorters like Conan and Northwest Smith—brave lassies like Jirel of Joiry.

Finlay's full page is much more to my taste this time. The spires and skyline look so other worldish. Well, guess I'll wait for another installment of *The Hairy Ones Shall Dance* before I comment—somehow that Devil's Croft is enticing. Raggh—woof—grrr—I like so very much this *Toean Matjan*, but I cannot pronounce such words satisfactorily. And so I am riled, in spite of a cat tale—and such a pretty white cat! I have often wondered if a tiger would make a good pet. And so the verrüchter Austrian is now a block of ice in the black vastnesses of the void—and thus ends his *The Voyage of the Neutralia*. I found the closing installment rather flat, except for the Venusian centipedes and volcano. Doctor Keller turned out a nice one with his *Valley of Bones*—such, I believe, is entirely possible in this strange land of Africa. I was pleased to see your reprint of *Ethan Brand*—I have read it so many times along with others of Hawthorne's tales."

Both Lusty and Devout

Manly Wade Wellman writes from New York City: "Let me vote for Quinn's *Roads* as the most impressive thing in the January WT. It gives me to think thus: does not the world of fantasy hold its good powers as well as evil, its saints and angels as well as its fiends and devils? *Roads* was both lusty and devout, as a good Christmas tale should be."

Finlay Frontispiece

Robert A. Madle writes from Philadelphia: "Thanks exceedingly for inaugurating the new frontispiece department. Both picturizations which have appeared have been supreme. Virgil Finlay is unquestionably the modern master of weird art, as H. P. Lovecraft was the unquestioned master of weird fiction. Continue this department, and have Finlay illustrate the entire interior of the magazine hereafter. His covers are also superb, but do not neglect Brundage entirely. She is one of the best artists of the decade."

Reprints

N. J. O'Neail writes from Toronto his selection of the fifteen best stories in WEIRD TALES for 1937, and comments: "You may notice that five on my list—one third of the

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established early in 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1934	1935	1936	1937	1938
Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
Feb.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
Mar.	Mar.	Mar.	Mar.	....
Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	....
May	May	May	May	....
June	June	June	June	....
July	July	July	July	....
....	....	....	Aug.	....
Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	....
Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	....
Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	....
Dec.	Dec.	Dec.	Dec.	....

These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back copies on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back issues is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

WEIRD TALES

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total—are reprints; probably not surprizing, since the reprints represent, in theory, and usually in practise, the cream of bygone issues. I shouldn't be surprized if a demand soon arose for a re-reprint section, in which some of the reprints of eight and nine years ago might reappear once more. . . . You began reprinting from back numbers in 1928, when WT was only five years old. Now it has rounded out its fifteenth year; and it might be reasoned that a story which was worth reprinting once, five years after its first publication, might merit another such honor ten years later."

Overrated

Richard Kraft, of Allenhurst, New Jersey, writes: "To my mind the most overrated story you have ever published was *Quest of the Starstone*. It was simply a cheap thriller and did not compare with Paul Ernst's *Dread Summons* or Rex Ernest's *The Inn*. In the December issue Edmond Hamilton again writes a winner: *Child of Atlantis*. Hamilton is the best in the business and I enjoy his work immensely. *The Sea-Witch* was terrible —I can't see what WEIRD TALES readers will find in it, as it was slow and tiresome, nothing like that swell story of Mary Counselman's in that issue, *The Black Stone Statue*."

Virgil Finlay's Drawings

Doctor Karl K. Webber writes from Flora, Illinois: "This is the first time I have written you, although I have been an avid reader of WEIRD TALES for about six years. In the December 1937 issue, *The Sea-Witch* is 'tops,' with *Flames of Vengeance* a close second, and *Child of Atlantis* hot on the latter's heels. One thing must be kept in your publication and that is Virgil Finlay's drawing. I'm a little bit of an artist myself and I recognize a masterful touch when I see it. No one can approach his subtle mastery of pen and ink. Orchids to Virgil!"

A Million Congratulations

Julius Hopkins writes from Washington, D. C.: "*Roads* is one of the most high-class stories that WT has ever printed. Throughout, the language is elevating, and not the usual, pulpy kind prevalent in a great many tales written today. I truly believe that any magazine would have been glad to have this story between its covers. WT should be mighty proud to have been privileged to print it. A million congratulations to you, Mr. Quinn, for a really outstanding story."

Norse Mythology

M. W. Schauffler, of Larchmont, New York, writes: "The Howard and Quinn stories have been what I have bought the magazine for, and I have been buying it for eight years. One other thing which makes your magazine a pleasure is that almost always the mythology and other background data are accurate. So please speak to Nictzin Dyalhis, if you don't mind, and ask him to check a little more carefully. I don't know when I have liked a story better than *The Sea-Witch*. But the moment when his Witch and his hero both agreed that Ran was a god, not a goddess, wrecked the illusion of factuality for me to the end of the story. And there were two other minor slips: No viking was ever named Gudrun any more than he was named Eliza, and for the same reason—it is a woman's name. Neither was Comnenus ever spelled with two n's—though that's a small matter. As for the viking's refrain to the rowing-song, he probably knows more than I do about that—I am not an authority on Norse legends. But I have a feeling that it isn't entirely, or at least typically, a sea refrain."

Quinn's Masterpiece

Bernard Austin Dwyer writes from West Shokan, New York: "My first choice of stories in the January issue is *Roads* by Seabury Quinn. This is truly Quinn's masterpiece; I have never seen anything even remotely so good by him. In my opinion, it far overtops even *The Phantom Farmhouse*. Apart from the story itself, which is delightful and wonderful—the fetching together of such ordinarily widely separated elements as Christ's crucifixion, a blond heroic warrior from the North, a harlot from the house of Magdalene, the Eastern and Western dynasties, and the Middle Ages, the little carved sleighs, the dwarf faery, smiths of the mountains, and the legend of Santa Claus—the style itself is very beautiful. I love especially the last few paragraphs with their flavor of the iron and heroic North, the Valhalla-like feast; how Klaus laid aside his arms, and the final piercing and beautiful paragraph. But I love everything—the story and the style, from beginning to end. . . . This story will go down as one of the very best, by *any*

author, ever to be published in WEIRD TALES. It is a masterpiece, fit to rank with Howard's *Kings of the Night* or Lovecraft's *Whisperer in Darkness*. I feel impelled to thank Mr. Quinn heartily for giving me the opportunity to read so satisfactory, wonderfully imaginative and beautiful a story. That style is something to dream about. Next, I will mention a very short poem—*Lost Dream*, dedicated to our departed master Lovecraft, by Emil Petaja. May I express my appreciation of how that little poem coincides with one's impressions of the works of Lovecraft? 'One fumbles in his scarlet cloak; I see his slender fingers move—he turns a key . . .' a silver key, of course. Congratulations to Mr. Petaja for his splendid little poem. May we hope for more? My next favorite story is *Toean Matjan*, by Vennette Herron—a very good story, well tied together, and beautiful style. It is exquisitely written. I don't know when I have read a more entertaining story, written in better style. In fact, I like the style quite as well as that of *Roads*, only that it is of course shorter. I am quite sure that I should not care to court that lady. I like *The Witch's Mark*, and *The Hairy Ones Shall Dance*. In the latter, it is already rather obvious that the wolfish materialization came from Doctor Zoberg—*vide* his thick, sinewy wrists! It is right entertaining. Let me, too, commend most warmly *The Inn*, in a recent issue. Splendid atmosphere."

Compliment and Complaint

Wilfred Wright writes from Toronto: "During the last fifteen years that I have been a consistent reader of WT I have only written twice to the Eyrie, submitting my comments. But your January issue compels me to write for the third time, to express a compliment and a complaint. First the compliment. *Roads*, by Seabury Quinn, stands out as the most beautiful piece of fantasy ever published in any magazine. From early in the story the outcome was obvious, yet at no time did it detract from the beauty or interest of the compelling and reverent treatment of a sacred theme. Mr. Quinn is indeed to be congratulated upon his ability, and I wish to extend to him my personal thanks for enriching my Christmas by his magnificent story. Now for the complaint—or perhaps I should say 'question.' The story *Toean Matjan* by Vennette Herron—while I

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appreciate it as a very splendid weird tale, it should have been entered as a reprint, as I read the same story in the magazine section of the *Toronto Star Weekly* three or four months ago. With the exception of the reprint story, I always had the impression that all stories published in WEIRD TALES were original, and I would like to be informed regarding the editorial policy in this matter. As for my voting for the best stories in the current issue, it is on this occasion impossible, for with all appreciation for the other tales in this issue, Seabury Quinn's *Roads* defies comparison." [*Toean Matjan* was sold to us as a new story which had seen publication in England only. We did not know that it had been printed in Canada. Like many other publications, WEIRD TALES occasionally buys outstanding stories that have already been printed in the British Isles, but we do not knowingly use stories that have been published in North America.—THE EDITOR.]

Brickbats

J. Vernon Shea, Jr., writes from Pittsburgh: "I wish Seabury Quinn hadn't written *Roads,* for that tale for children has no place in WT. It made me squirm. Of the stories in the January issue, I prefer *Toean Matjan,* a beautifully written version of a familiar theme. Miss Herron is a highly promising newcomer. Edmond Hamilton had a novel idea in *The House of Living Music,* but ruined it by his formula handling. *The Witch's Mark* marks considerable of an advancement for Dorothy Quick, but I for one am pretty fed-up with witch-women, especially when they go through their all-too-familiar routines. I wish you would caution your authors against topical subjects as applied to weird tales. They have not the immediacy the authors imagine them to have, but intrude unpleasantly in a non-realistic field. Thus, the attempted lynching in *The Hairy Ones Shall Dance,* which seems to be taken from the motion picture *Fury,* seemed wildly incongruous in WT. Don't misunderstand me: I am very fond of realism in a realistic story, but hardly consider much realism fitting for WT."

A New Reader

Margaret H. Gray writes from Steubenville, Ohio: "Greetings from a comparatively new member of your circle of WEIRD TALES readers. I have been reading your magazine for only one short year, much to my chagrin. I have just completed the January edition, and I say that there are entirely too many days to wait until February. *The Witch's Mark* was by far the best in this issue. Perhaps I am prejudiced, as I am brimful of Irish and Scottish folklore, but the translating of Deidre and Shamus into modern life, is in my eyes, a masterpiece. Some more stories just like it, please, Dorothy Quick! (By the way, is she Irish?) Virgil Finlay's illustrations are still 'splendiferous' (that's my own invention!) and M. Brundage's cover picture is grand. *Toean Matjan,* by Vennette Herron, rates second in my list. I love stories like this. May we have some more, if you please? I am collecting all of those illustration passages from poetry so that I can frame them. Couldn't you make them in color? I think I have asked too many questions already. Good luck, WT, and may the sun never set on your splendid magazine."

A Posing Tiger

Michael Liene writes from Hazleton, Pennsylvania: "*Toean Matjan,* by Vennette Herron, was a strange little tale, beautifully written. The tiger in the illustration looks suspiciously like the one used to advertise Listerine mouth wash, or some such. Or did this tiger take up posing for advertisements, in the spare time he had, aside from jealously guarding our heroine of the story? Were it not for Quinn's beautifully told story, *Roads,* I would have given *Toean Matjan* first place in the January issue—the story, I mean, not the tiger. . . . Gans T. Field's *The Hairy Ones Shall Dance* serial has started out quite thrillingly. It leaves the reader all prepared for startling events, which will either make or ruin the story. But if the first installment is any indication of shudders, I just took my racoon coat out of storage."

He Wants a Sequel

Alvin V. Pershing writes from Anderson, Indiana: "Would it be proper to ask for a sequel to *The Sea-Witch?* That story was a tremendous knock-out, amazing and *weird.* It was one of the best stories I have ever read. Virgil's black-and-white frontispiece was a real addition to the magazine."

Quinn and Howard

J. Mackay Tait writes from Bridgetown,

Nova Scotia: "In my humble opinion, the most thoroughly enjoyable stories that appear in WT are those by such writers as Seabury Quinn and Robert E. Howard (how I miss that boy!), in which there is a little humanity, a little humor, a little happiness. Poe's works are abnormal, the product (admittedly so) of a diseased mind. They aren't true to life. They are literary lunacy, analogous in art to the works of Dali, or in sculpture to those of Epstein. There is never any situation, no matter how desperate, in which all hope and humor are entirely absent. I served four years with the Canadian infantry during the war . . . and although we lived in terror a great deal of the time—particularly I—I never once found myself in a position where it was all fear and horror. In this month's WT there is a story by Nictzin Dyalhis, *The Sea-Witch*, that I believe to be one of the best ever to appear in our magazine. And my opinion is not influenced by the really splendid cover design by Virgil Finlay—a vast improvement over some of the misproportioned females who have displayed their impossible charms on covers of the past, even if the girl *has* misplaced her navel. The story deals with the occult, it has horror, it has suspense; but it also has love, tenderness, humor (not funniness), and a delightfully unexpected happy ending. . . . Another criticism (I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb) I have to make of a great many of your stories, although not only of the Poe style, is directed at the obviously labored attempts at maintaining an atmosphere of gloom and impending evil throughout the narrative. Why should this be necessary? Because a man walking along a lonely country road in a rainstorm is to encounter, half a mile farther on, a grisly werewolf is no reason, that I can see, for the limbs of the trees to appear like skeleton arms reaching out for him, or for the raindrops to fall with the sound of hissing snakes bent upon his destruction, or for the wind to howl at him with the voices of a thousand haunted spirits. Unless he is mentally abnormal, neurotic or a confirmed and industrious disciple of Bacchus, a country road would be a country road and nothing more. It may be the tradition to write weird stories in that way, but it is illogical nevertheless. Horror rarely sets the stage before descending upon us. I wish it did! When it strikes, it strikes suddenly,

NEXT MONTH

The Eyes of the Mummy

By ROBERT BLOCH

THAT young writing marvel, Robert Bloch, has never written a stranger or more thrilling story than this. It is a story of Egypt, a gripping tale of flaming weird jewels in the eye-sockets of a withered mummy, an eery narrative that will hold your breathless interest to the end.

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without warning. From happiness we are switched to misery and back again almost without knowing how it all happened. The trouble with striving constantly for this kind of atmosphere is that it defeats its own purpose. You are plunged into gloom with the story's first paragraph and are mentally prepared for anything that may happen. When I bought a volume of Poe's works some years ago, I naturally waded through those dealing in horror first. 'Waded' is the *mot juste*. By the time I had read three of them, I was so saturated with their atmosphere that they had lost all value as shockers. I have never finished the volume and I never will. (This is sacrilege but I can't help it.) People are constantly borrowing my books—sometimes they return them—but I have never had any one of them borrow the volume of Poe although it still retains its attractive red-and-black cover. I don't believe people like that kind of literature. They like horror, mystery, even cruelty; but they like it dished up palatably. You can consign this to the editorial waste-basket if you like, but it is my sincere conviction that more stories of the Seabury Quinn type would sell more copies of WT."

Concise Comments

T. O. Mabbott writes from New York City: "My votes this month are for *Roads*, which has the truth of a legend about it, though curiously enough for Seabury Quinn, it struck me as deserving a cut or two to make the thing a little more compact; second: *Valley of Bones*—simple and wholly credible while being read, and, third, *Toean Matjan*, where I wished for a stronger suggestion the tiger was sometimes a man, too."

James Whiting Saunders writes from Alexandria, Virginia: "In the January issue the best story is *Ethan Brand*. It is an almost timeless allegory, of course. Thank you for printing an American classic."

Paul L. McCleave writes from St. Petersburg, Florida: "*The Sea-Witch* was truly the 'tops' in the December WEIRD TALES. Nictzin Dyalhis (how'd he ever get that name, anyway?) must have a thorough knowledge of the old Norse mythology."

Seymour Kapetansky writes from Detroit: "Lovecraft's *Hypnos* is one of the late master's obscure-weird pieces. A grand fictional yarn. I think that the reprint should contain a Lovecraft as often as possible, and ditto the early Robert E. Howards. These men were the best weird writers; their work should appear often. That will be their best memorial."

Harold F. Keating writes from Quincy, Massachusetts: "*The Black Stone Statue* by Mary Counselman is gorgeous. Most of her stories are excellent; but this was the best yet."

Howard Brenton MacDonald writes from Yonkers, New York: "*The Sea-Witch* was an exceptionally fine story. I am glad to see some author making use of the vast treasury of Norse mythology. Let's have more."

H. W. Marlan writes from Union City, Tennessee: "In the December number Virgil Finlay is superb. Words fail me, and I can only attempt to express my appreciation for this new feature. These first two I have already framed and they occupy a position of honor in my room."

Andrew Galet writes from New York City: "I now have a double incentive for buying WT, but, please have Virgil Finlay's full-page drawing inside the back cover of your magazine. Not only will his illustrations be more fully appreciated but one could always tear the cover off and have the drawings framed."

Orin S. McFarland writes from Washington, D. C.: "I've read your magazine for the last six years and know there is nothing like it. Keep up the good work. There are a few stories that don't quite click, but so few that all the good ones outshine, by far, any defect that your magazine may otherwise possess."

Flo M. Post writes from Guthrie, Oklahoma: "Tales of robots with human minds are just gibberish—and not weird gibberish either—whether they inhabit Mars, Venus, the Moon, or an Atlantis."

The Most Popular Story

Readers, it will help us to keep this magazine just as you like it to be, if you will let us know which stories you like best, and also which ones you dislike. In the January issue, as shown by your votes and letters, Seabury Quinn's strange tale about Santa Claus easily won first place. Vennette Herron's story about the were-tiger came next.

W. T.—8

COMING NEXT MONTH

AT THE core of the strange garden, where a circular space was still vacant amid the crowding growths, Adompha came to a mound of loamy, fresh-dug earth. Beside it, wholly nude, and pale and supine as if in death, there lay the odalisque Thuloneah. Near her, various knives and other implements, together with vials of liquid balsams and viscid gums that Dwerulas used in his grafting, had been emptied upon the ground from a leathern bag. A plant known as the *dedaim*, with a bulbous, pulpy, whitish-green bole from whose center rose and radiated several leafless reptilian boughs, dripped upon Thuloneah's bosom an occasional drop of yellowish-red ichor from incisions made in its smooth bark.

Behind the loamy mound, Dwerulas rose to view with the suddenness of a demon emerging from his subterrene lair. In his hands he held the spade with which he had just finished digging a deep and grave-like hole. Beside the regal stature and girth of Adompha, he seemed no more than a wizened dwarf. His aspect bore all the marks of immense age, as if dusty centuries had sered his flesh and sucked the blood from his veins. His eyes glowed in the bottom of pit-like orbits; his features were black and sunken as those of a long-dead corpse; his body was gnarled as some millennial desert cedar. He stooped incessantly, so that his lank, knotty arms hung almost to the ground. Adompha marveled at the strength of those arms; marveled that Dwerulas could have wielded the heavy shovel so expeditiously, could have carried to the garden on his back the burden of those victims whose members he had utilized in his experiments. The king had never demeaned himself to assist at such labors; but, after indicating from time to time the people whose disappearance would in no wise displease him, had done nothing more than watch and supervise the baroque gardening.

"Is she dead?" Adompha questioned, eyeing the luxurious limbs and body of Thuloneah without emotion.

"Nay," said Dwerulas, in a voice harsh as a rusty coffin-hinge, "but I have administered to her the drowsy and overpowering juice of the *dedaim*. Her heart beats impalpably, her blood flows with the sluggishness of that mingled ichor. She will not reawaken . . . save as a part of the garden's life, sharing its obscure sentience. I wait now your further instructions. What portion . . . or portions?"

"Her hands were very deft," said Adompha, as if musing aloud, in reply to the half-uttered question. "They knew the subtle ways of love and were learned in all amorous arts. I would have you preserve her hands . . . but nothing else." . . .

A strange story indeed is this, written in the magic words of one of the greatest living masters of weird fiction. What happened to Thuloneah when her arms were grafted to the *dedaim* tree makes a fascinating and unusual weird story of immense interest and power. It will be printed complete in the April issue of WEIRD TALES:

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By ROBERT BLOCH

A fascinating story of flashing jewels and an old Egyptian tomb—a story with a strange and terrible climax.

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By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

A story of many thrills—a tale of weird adventures and dire perils in the Dead Forest of Sanaala.

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An odd and curious story is this, about a fatal game of cards, played with a most peculiar deck containing neither spades, hearts, diamonds nor clubs.

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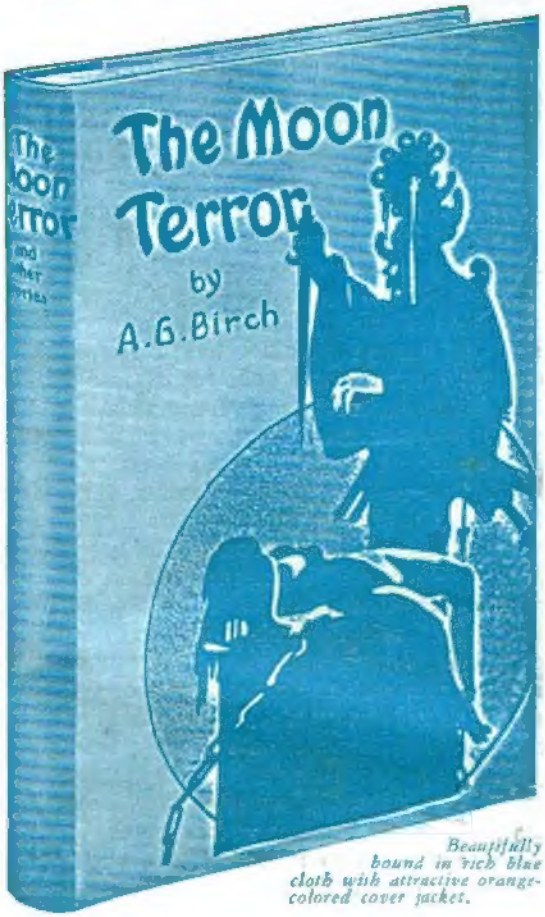

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